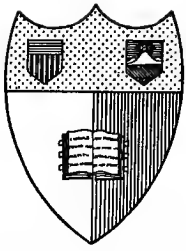
THE HUMAN COBWEB

B. L. PUTNAM WEALE



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THE HUMAN COBWEB

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INDISCREET LETTERS FROM PEKING
THE COMING STRUGGLE IN EASTERN ASIA
THE FORBIDDEN BOUNDARY AND OTHER STORIES

The Human Cobweb

A Romance of Peking

BY

B. L. PUTNAM WEALE



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To the Memory of
My Father

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

"La dernière chose qu'on trouve en faisant un ouvrage, est de savoir celle qu'il faut mettre la première."—PASCAL.

IT was almost exactly eight o'clock when the first guests reached Mrs. John West's hospitable house, and it was almost exactly a quarter past before the last person had arrived. It was significant, in Mrs. John West's eyes, that the first comers should have been Phyllis May and her mother, and that the very last man of all had been no other than Peter Kerr. Somehow, it at once attracted her attention. The significance, it is true, was of that special kind which means infinitely more to a woman than to a man; for Peter Kerr's lateness might have really been occasioned by a hundred different things having not the slightest connection with this particular dinner-party. Certainly, if his apologies meant anything, it was only his watch which had been at fault, which is another way of saying that he had been forgetful or careless.

But Mrs. John West was one of those women who cling to preconceived ideas, and who pay scant attention to masculine explanations. Also she had arrived at that puzzling age when one ponders over things and gives undue importance to the deductive method.

It was therefore a source of further satisfaction for her to be able to note that Peter Kerr deliberately delayed going up to Phyllis May until further delay had become impossible. Even when that last unfortunate moment had come, he made his greetings with his habitually easy manner curiously restrained and overcast by something difficult to explain. A faulty timepiece could not explain that, thought Mrs. John West a little triumphantly to herself, as she allowed

a few more reflective minutes to go by before sending her guests into dinner. And whilst she talked a little vaguely to General Shaw, a somewhat taciturn veteran who had gained a great reputation in India principally by maintaining a gloomy and discretionary silence through a long term of years, she definitely made up her mind that Phyllis May's chances of marrying Peter Kerr had for some reason entirely vanished. Mrs. John West had not time enough to try to guess what had suddenly come over Peter Kerr; what mainly struck her was that for woman to dispose man must first propose. Man's position appeared to her just then singularly superior, and this unconsciously both piqued and interested her.

Peter Kerr, however, whatever his innermost thoughts and his particular motives may have been, was much too much a man of the world to allow it to be generally noticed that subtle changes in the mental attitudes of several people in the room had undoubtedly taken place since his appearance. For no sooner were they all seated at table than, as if conscious that he might be observed, he launched out into animated description of a new invention which, if it were as successful as was anticipated, might once again revolutionize the industrial world. As he talked, Phyllis May, who was on his right, took care to interject frequent remarks, to show that she was highly interested in a matter which of course greatly bored her. Her interest was so pronounced that Mrs. John West speedily assumed that she had reached the same conclusion as herself. Mrs. John West even began to wonder, when her duties as hostess allowed her attention to stray so far, whether Phyllis, as soon as dinner was over, might not show that acute concern which is expected in young girls when they are grievously disappointed. In other words, Mrs. John West—quite erroneously—credited Phyllis with a desire to weep a little—which made the situation all the more interesting to her.

For Phyllis May was not only relatively young but actually so, and nothing but circumstances over which she had exer-

cised little control had been responsible for the assumption which had quite lately grown up that Peter Kerr would inevitably marry her. The assumption, indeed, had been almost purely one made by her mother and by a few intimate friends like Mrs. John West, who having married early themselves were quite willing to believe that all other girls would certainly do likewise—that is, if they could. Yet Phyllis herself, since she was only eighteen, had been far too much satisfied with the comforts of life in London with her widowed mother to wish to fling impulsively away from home with a man whom a perfunctory marriage service would convert into her husband. Such an idea was naturally foreign to her; she did not belong to the class of women who are inevitably associated with perambulators and babies. But circumstances are generally the controlling factors in a rather lazy and drifting world; and the circumstances which had undoubtedly begun unduly to influence Phyllis May whilst she was at this plastic age had been that she was thrown a good deal into the society of men who were both free and frank, and who, finding her sympathetic and very easy to talk to, had confided in her so much that possibly too quickly she had believed that she must be an exceptional girl who would make her choice the very moment it might please her to do so. Between this and actual marriage there is no great gulf, as all those who are learned in the intricacies of matrimony must admit.

Of all these men, Peter Kerr had quickly stepped far in advance, mainly because of certain mental qualities he seemed to possess. Phyllis May's very first impression of him had been that he was clever, though wayward and rather difficult to understand. Perhaps it was that which attracted her. He was also handsome in a somewhat harsh way, his features being too strong for a formal, black-coated, silk-hatted age. They seemed to inform one continually that his remote forebears had been engaged in the rudest occupations; and that this, their far-off descendant, had in him the germs of their callous savagery and inconvenient resolution. It was even

said at his club that it required no very great stretch of imagination to picture Peter Kerr cutting off heads and coolly counting them so as to make sure that he had not been defrauded of his just toll. They gilded this pill by adding that they meant that he would make an excellent executioner in an historic pageant. He would look the part, they meant. That explanation, however, was an afterthought. The first thought—like all first thoughts—was the instinctive one.

Not that it was meant thereby that Peter Kerr was necessarily cruel and merciless. Rather was it implied that his character was such that if he put his hand to a gruesome job he would probably carry it through inflexibly, with his reputed heredity materially assisting him in the task, and indeed showing him, in some subtle and inexplicable way, exactly what to do. Gossip of this sort is rather hard on a man, for it is generally not founded on those facts which satisfy a Mr. Francis Galton, and if faces alone told the whole truth it would be a very unfortunate day for a good many people in the world.

Nevertheless this reputed quality—and the fact that he was clever and rather difficult to understand—had probably singled him out more than anything else in Phyllis May's eyes; for one day some one had told her of the club saying, and it seemed to her so apposite that she could not help remembering it. Women, as they themselves admit, are curious beings at the best of times; and perhaps there is nothing in the world quite so hard to conciliate with men's rules of common sense as the very young woman with imagination. Desdemona's affection for the Moor appears in the present sophisticated age an endless puzzle. Yet it was, after all, nothing very strange. It was merely because Othello spoke of most disastrous chances of moving accidents by flood and field, of hairbreadth escapes in the imminent-deadly breach, that Desdemona saw his visage only in his mind and was willing to consecrate her soul and fortunes to his honours and valiant parts. This is the same as saying that he infected her with the germ of hero-worship (or

battle-worship), which is a deadly germ, upsetting all laws and very dangerous indeed. To the ordinary masculine mind it is no doubt strange that such things should exist—especially when the hero is sooty-faced; yet doubtless these strange things assist to adjust the general balance in the world and should not be too much decried. Perhaps Phyllis May could not help believing that Peter Kerr embodied certain qualities which made him different from other men and essential to her happiness. Possibly again, idly pursuing this line of thought, she had sometimes built numbers of those extravagant castles which have no more solidity than the morning vapours. It is never possible to know exactly what other people think.

Peter Kerr in the ordinary course of events should have surrendered to the inevitable ere now; that is, he should have proposed. But a week or two ago, as if suspecting the part he was called upon to play, he had suddenly become elusive, alleging that he was so busy that he had little or no time for his friends. It was exactly for this reason that Mrs. John West had pinned him down to this particular dinner-party. And now, in the space of relatively few minutes, it had been clearly demonstrated to the subtle feminine mind that he was strictly on the defensive and wished this to be clearly understood. It was cruel of him, perhaps, but these are the facts.

Everything seemed to favour him. The conversation at the pleasant dinner-table for no good reason had been suddenly swept into an excited political discussion, making the probability of that culminating *tête-à-tête* which Mrs. John West had pictured to herself more and more remote. The dinner, instead of bringing the two together, was somehow estranging them more and more, and a keen student of psychology would have realized at once that there was battle rather than love in the air.

It was, however, the fault of Fate, not of man. The Far East, though ten thousand miles away, had lately communicated to England a series of electrical shocks which seemed

to herald the gravest events. After a period of delusive calm, following the months of the Japanese war with China, Russia had quite unexpectedly started the ball rolling again in far-off Asia; and then, when some rapid diplomacy had almost checkmated the designs which Muscovite statesmen showed they possessed, Germany had suddenly appeared on the scene, and by her promptitude in landing marines and seizing a strip of Chinese territory, as punishment for the inopportune massacre of some of her missionaries, had justified and made inevitable further Russian action. In those days it was not Germany who was the enemy; it was Russia.

It was this latest development which everybody was now discussing. The evening papers had just announced that Russia, determined to have an ice-free port in the Far East, had already despatched a small squadron to the harbour of Port Arthur, and although it seemed doubtful how far St. Petersburg would actually go in the teeth of British opposition, there was every possibility that Port Arthur would be forcibly annexed at once by the Czar's officers.

General Shaw, the taciturn Indian veteran, whose substantial Eastern reputation had been so largely built up by his discretionary silence, had been suddenly roused to undiplomatic and emphatic speech by the old Russian spectre. Though what he said was mainly a "warming-up" of things familiar to ten million newspaper readers, it was of that stuff which will never cease being popular. General Shaw felt sure he would be applauded; for the English, as a nation, because of certain historical and geographical reasons, love to feel menaced and then to be superfluously reminded at all hours of the day and night that never, never will they be slaves.

"Although I do not wish it to be supposed that I believe wholly these newspaper reports," the General was now announcing in an oracular manner, "I think it absolutely essential that we should do something at the present juncture. In India we know very well how these things are worked. First there is a small and innocent-looking forward move-

ment. Then, if no suspicions have been openly aroused, the Russians do a little more; then again a little more; until in the end it does not matter to them very much whether there is opposition from us or not. That has happened for half a century in Central Asia and on the Persian frontier, and to my mind we are beginning to skate on very thin ice. Fortunately, in this case, it is purely a question of sea-power, and we can undoubtedly act as we please."

General Shaw ended his monologue in some satisfaction. He was indeed so satisfied both with his logic and the ease with which he had spoken, that he sent a challenging glance round the dinner-table, as if it were impossible either to controvert his opinion or to add anything further. Although the hum of approval which he had expected now sounded pleasantly in his ears, the General had reckoned without Peter Kerr.

"I disagree with you absolutely, General," he began, so deliberately that Mrs. John West, more certain than ever that he was in a combative mood, nodded her head pointedly at Phyllis May. Phyllis herself was suddenly impressed with the idea that in some way this distant political turmoil specially interested Peter Kerr: otherwise she felt sure he would not have shown himself so concerned. In spite of herself she also became interested; and also, in spite of her resolve not to do so, she kept glancing at his face as he spoke. What was it? she wondered.

"In the first place," Kerr said, "it is all very well to talk about our sea-power; but is it merely a question of sea-power? I think not, for this reason. I am going to bore you all horribly, but to demolish the General's arguments I must be long-winded. After the Japanese war with China was concluded two or three years ago, you will all remember that three Powers came to China's help, and forced the Japanese to give back that southern portion of Manchuria on the coast of which Port Arthur lies. These Powers were Russia, Germany, and France. They acted strictly in concert three years ago, and it is morally certain that what is

now going on is privately considered by them as a mere liquidation of a just debt. That is, payment is being enforced for past services in the manner that is most pleasing to these Powers, whether China happens to like it or not. Germany and Russia have begun; France must follow. The question for us merely is whether we consider ourselves justified in risking a rebuff in a matter from which we stood quite aloof three years ago. Can we afford it?—that is the main question. Diplomatically and financially can we afford it? And supposing we can afford it, is the game really worth the candle? In any case there are other means available than those suggested by General Shaw. I could say a lot more, but I only want to put my finger on the weak spot in the General's argument that it is simply and purely a Russian question."

"I agree with you, Kerr," said a very serious-looking banker, Sir James Barker. "With us it should always be a question of money—a careful reckoning as to whether the game is worth the candle. In Europe our sea-power must be exerted from time to time, at all costs, but in Asiatic waters of no particular value I am utterly against taking adventurous risks. I am afraid, General, you have taken too much for granted."

Sir James Barker turned his solemn face slowly round from one end of the table to the other, much as a search-light is turned, and the immediate effect was to make the General's allies wonder why they had been so easily convinced. Usually this sort of conversation, excepting at the first blush, is not enlivening. The men become either so combative that they create alarm, or else, because the subject is dull and intricate, two or three constitute themselves spokesmen and all others become unwilling listeners. To-night it was different. There was undoubtedly electricity in the air, and people wanted to hear more of the subject.

"My dear General," said some one who loved to bait him, "your arguments seem more than a bit shaky."

General Shaw snorted his contempt. Thoroughly aroused,

he was now busy demonstrating to his end of the table, with the aid of salt-cellars and knives and forks, just what would happen if England were foolish enough to be guided by such opinions as those just expressed. It was a question concerning all Asia and not merely the Far East.

"It is all very well for them to talk," he grumbled, "but Kerr is an engineer and looks at things mathematically—that is, without political instinct. Barker is a banker, and we all understand what that means. I insist that I am right. Why, my dear madam," he concluded, turning to his hostess, "I have been in India for forty years. Am I not to be believed?"

Mrs. John West nodded sympathetically and allowed the General to mount his favourite hobby-horse, whilst secretly she listened to what was going on at the other end of the table. Her husband was trying to effect a compromise between the two extreme parties of peace and war which had suddenly arisen, but he was not very successful. Even the ladies had taken sides, and Phyllis, in a sudden spirit of opposition, added fuel to the flames by declaring aloud that she thought Peter Kerr was so thoroughly unpatriotic that he deserved summary treatment. Kerr, though he affected to laugh with everybody else, soon appeared openly annoyed at the attention he had drawn on himself. Making an effort, he now attempted to pass it all off as a matter of small importance.

"After all," he said, turning to Phyllis, "we are only theorizing, and none of our forecasts will come true. The unexpected will most certainly happen—what does it matter? Let us keep our ammunition for a better cause—don't you agree?"

Phyllis considered him carefully for a moment. Phyllis had remarkably intelligent eyes, which could see through most things, and just then she was determined to see through Peter Kerr.

"No," she replied very soon, "I do not agree. You are very much in earnest—that is quite clear. And I also

believe," she added in a lower tone, "that you have some special reason for being so interested. You see how far I have got already."

"And why should you believe that?"

Peter Kerr spoke almost defiantly; he seemed to wish to provoke her. Phyllis, however, only laughed; she had no intention of obliging him in any way, since she only wished to satisfy her own curiosity.

"How stupid men must be," she remarked. "I am quite sure about your special reason now. I wonder what it is?"

"I wonder you don't ask," rejoined Peter Kerr.

"Ask!" echoed Phyllis. "You must know that I never ask questions of that sort."

Foiled again, Peter Kerr toyed irritably with a knife on the table. He was not successful in his new rôle, he thought, and he was wondering how it was that he had lost his first advantage. It was foolish of him to have shown the slightest interest in the General's remarks. Yet when a man *is* interested how can he remain silent?

"I wonder," resumed Phyllis reflectively, "how far a man who is really pushed would go nowadays. Do you think men would do to-day the things they did a few hundred years ago?"

"Why not?" said Peter Kerr coolly. "That is, when they are not afraid of a policeman."

"That is what I think," replied Phyllis. "The subject has always interested me. You know," she continued a little maliciously, "you have a reputation to live up to. You know what they say about you?"

He listened in sudden amusement as Phyllis told him the club story which had been retailed to her.

"I am very much flattered," he replied, when she had ended. "I never knew I had so much to live up to. I must try and act my part better, or else you won't believe at all in me. What shall I do now, for instance? Speak, and I shall attempt to gratify you."

Phyllis looked at him suddenly and then looked away.

"I might ask something impossible," she suggested.

"That alone is impossible," replied Peter Kerr in a way which flattered her.

To her annoyance their conversation was interrupted before she could answer. A growing clamour in the street had at last been translated into the hoarse cries of a number of newspaper-boys who were evidently invading this residential quarter with a set purpose. Their calls, bellowed now in unison, now in single shouts, soon arrested general attention. There was a buzz of comments at the dinner-table. It was clear that there was news of importance. Kerr suddenly sat up in an attitude of expectancy, and Phyllis saw that she was again forgotten.

"Throw open a window and find out what it is," said John West to the butler, to gratify every one's growing curiosity. General Shaw, who was still busy insisting on the accuracy of his views, for some reason suddenly turned the colour of a turkey-cock, as if in apprehension of his coming confusion. Sir James Barker, catching sight of him, chuckled to himself and tried to attract Kerr's attention. The others showed their interest in various mannerisms.

The butler had discreetly unbolted a window at the far end of the room, and now thrust out his head. Everybody waited to hear what it was.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man finally, somewhat confusedly, conscious that all eyes were fixed on him. "I can't catch it, sir. It is hard to hear, sir. . . ."

He was continuing to murmur vague excuses, when Peter Kerr suddenly got up, and with a look at Mrs. John West and a word of explanation to West himself went to the window. His head had been outside only a few seconds when he withdrew it. With a motion to the butler to close the glass he came slowly back to the table. Phyllis noticed that his face had a singular expression.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said with a satirical little bow, as if this victory amused him, "I have the honour to announce that according to the newsboys the British squadron has

definitely withdrawn from Port Arthur, and the Russian occupation is now accepted as a *fait accompli.*"

A storm of exclamations and comments greeted this startling piece of news. Whilst West was instructing the butler at once to buy copies of the newspapers, General Shaw, more purple in the face than ever, was showering adjectives round the table.

"Monstrous, unheard-of, idiotic!" he proclaimed. "There will be trouble, never fear, never fear." He continued to talk in indignant snatches, as if the question had become a personal matter, as if he had been insulted; but the others were too busy with their own remarks to notice much what he was saying. Peter Kerr had quietly taken his seat at table.

"It is *kismet,*" he said very calmly to Phyllis May, breathing deeply. "I was almost certain it was coming. It has come. I am abnormally glad."

"I suppose you will tell us the real reason by and by," Phyllis replied, feeling that her advantage had gone.

It was characteristic of Peter Kerr that he had ceased to listen to her. He murmured something vague in reply, whilst he looked inquiringly across the table in Sir James Barker's direction. Barker just then raised his head, and Phyllis noticed that the two men smiled at each other significantly.

"Ah!" said Phyllis involuntarily, loud enough for Peter Kerr to hear. He turned at once.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Nothing," she answered. "I was merely following up my trail. I will soon catch you."

Peter Kerr remained silent. He was very busy thinking. Phyllis rapidly ran through everything she remembered his having said during the evening. There must be some connection between these two undoubted clues—Sir James Barker and the retirement of a British squadron. What could it be? But Mrs. John West was now anxiously signalling to her, and her thread of thought was once again snapped as she got up to go.

Left to themselves the men hastily ran over the telegraphic columns of the special editions which had been so dramatically announced. There was evidently no doubt about the news being true; the Russians had accomplished their *coup*, and the small British squadron which had followed them into Port Arthur fully cleared for action, had steamed away to another Chinese harbour in obedience to direct instructions from London. So said the cables. This much was clear, but as to what was going to follow even the sapient editors of the evening newspapers confessed themselves in doubt. However, to help people to understand something of it all for themselves, roughly-drawn maps of the Far East, with strategic points clearly marked, had been printed beneath the tell-tale telegrams, and the intelligent reader, with this scrap of geography thrown at him, was evidently expected to construct his own theory without further editorial help.

Peter Kerr, with a newspaper in his hand, had soon withdrawn into a corner with Sir James Barker, and was now talking rapidly and earnestly whilst the banker blew clouds of cigar-smoke thoughtfully into the air. General Shaw, still nettled at the manner in which his theories and arguments had been demolished by stern fact, had moved up beside John West and was consoling himself liberally with port. At the same time he watched the two men in the corner with a grim smile. He was really much put out, and did not trouble to conceal it.

"I had no idea, West," he said finally, "that Kerr and Barker knew each other so well. As a matter of fact, when one thinks of it, their theories are so much of a piece that they must have discussed this question a good deal by themselves and formed their own conclusions. Look at the way Kerr is laying down the law."

Peter Kerr, in his earnestness, had seized hold of Sir James Barker's arm and was literally pulling him along in his arguments. The banker, accustomed to caution and yet now openly elated, was nodding his head approvingly and at the same time hushing Kerr. A couple of other men, who had

pushed their chairs back and were smoking thoughtfully in silence, looked up surprised as Peter Kerr, to clinch his argument, struck his hand heavily against the wall.

"That is the only way, and the road we must follow," every one heard him say. Then, as if suddenly conscious that his forgetfulness in a room full of listening men was indiscreet, he suddenly laughed and slowly came back to the table.

In the drawing-room Mrs. John West had seated herself beside Phyllis May, and was holding her hand as she gossiped to her.

"Our friend seems in a droll humour to-night," she said tentatively, after they had talked a little of other things, as she examined a pretty chain which hung round Phyllis's neck. "I have come to the conclusion," she went on, "that he is rather curious—in fact, a good deal of an unknown quantity. Don't you think so, Phyllis dear?"

Mrs. John West's hope that a confession might be forthcoming disappeared as she glanced at the girl's face.

"Perhaps," rejoined Phyllis laconically. Phyllis leaned back in her chair and gazed lazily at her hostess through half-closed eyelids. She disliked the interrogative form of conversation very cordially just now, and she was annoyed with Mrs. John West's attitude. Undoubtedly she had been nettled at Peter Kerr's general attitude, but then that was her business. Phyllis had a mind of her own, which her mother was never tired of warning her would sooner or later bring her to a special kind of perdition. So, determined not to give the slightest encouragement, she now began talking on indifferent subjects.

Mrs. John West, foiled in her object, hardly listened as she looked round the room. She too was thinking about Peter Kerr. She wondered whether she had made a mistake in thinking Phyllis suitable for him. Perhaps he was not a marrying man. He had certainly reached an age when he might be counted on to know his own mind. She hoped that he would not be irritated with her—she would not like

that. Mrs. John West looked critically at Phyllis as if she were measuring her for a new gown. Yes—she had evidently made a mistake. She was rather sorry she had shown so much concern, after all.

"I wonder what has happened to the men," ventured Phyllis at length, after nearly half an hour had elapsed. She had exhausted nearly every neutral subject and was beginning to feel rather dismal.

"There was such a warlike feeling that I should not be surprised if they began fighting. Perhaps the General is leading them against one another." Mrs. John West suppressed a yawn as she glanced at the clock. "If they do not come soon, I shall have to send," she concluded.

Fortunately, the sound of a chorus of voices, laughing and protesting loudly, grew nearer, and when the door opened, in came West leading Sir James Barker and Peter Kerr by the arm.

"Here are the two culprits, my dear," he said, bringing his captives to his wife. "They were in a corner hatching a dark plot for hours, and we could do nothing with them. They would have remained there all night, I believe, if they had not become suspicious about our ears. Now, Kerr, tell the truth. What was it all about? At least you cannot refuse the ladies."

Although West affected to laugh, his curiosity had also been aroused, and he was really quite serious.

"Oh, yes, you will have to tell," urged Mrs. John West, seconding her husband and looking persuasively at the younger man.

Peter Kerr laughed and glanced at the banker. Sir James Barker had become preternaturally solemn. He looked as if he feared that Kerr might be persuaded to say something indiscreet.

"We should like to oblige you," began the important man, speaking for both of them, "but——"

"I will give them a clue and no more," broke in Peter Kerr,

nudging Barker. "We were just talking about steel, nothing more and nothing less—just hard steel—and that is all we propose to tell you."

There was a disappointed chorus. Mrs. John West tried to entrap Peter Kerr into saying more, but laughingly he sought safety by retreating suddenly and leaving it to Sir James Barker to face the enemy. Fate, however, willed that he should walk into the very corner of the room where Phyllis May was now sitting alone, and Phyllis now being in a captious mood, his satisfaction at his quick retreat was short-lived. At once she commenced baiting him.

"What have I done to incur such ruthless hostility?" he inquired at length in aggrieved tones. He looked so hurt that Phyllis relented a little.

"You know," she said in her most engaging manner, "when you conceal things from the inquisitive female mind you must expect anything. A secret drives us mad."

"Look here," said Kerr suddenly, making up his mind, "I am going to tell you. It is all about railways—railways in China. For Heaven's sake tell no one—not even your mother—or I am lost."

Phyllis sat up quickly.

"Then," she said, "you will have to go away—far away?"

Peter Kerr nodded to her silently.

"Oh!" said Phyllis, and that is all she said.

When Mrs. John West managed to find a few minutes to leave her other guests, she discovered the two still in the same corner. Peter Kerr with Phyllis May's fan in his hand was drawing imaginary lines and circles on the floor, and Phyllis was listening to him in close attention. The breach between the two had apparently been healed. Such is the contrariety of woman that Mrs. John West, instead of being pleased, was somewhat angry.

"My dear Phyllis," she said at once, "we want you over there." She put out her hand and brought the girl to her feet. For a moment they stood there hand in hand—Phyllis

lithe and almost childlike, Mrs. John West mature and magnificent.

Later, Peter Kerr, walking slowly home and smoking a meditative cigar, had a good deal to think about. At intervals, when his mind came back to the people he had just left, somehow Phyllis May and Mrs. John West became entwined in a curious yet fascinating way, as they had last stood together. And thus entwined, they became almost symbolical of something which finished by irritating and perplexing him.

CHAPTER II

"L'imagination est la folle du logis."—VOLTAIRE,
Dictionnaire Philosophique.

IT took some little time for the great English public to realize the meaning of the political events which had taken place at the other end of the world; but as soon as the general outlines had become clear, a dull and perhaps unreasonable anger speedily grew up. That Russia, the traditional enemy, should have so manifestly succeeded in outwitting England, by means of fair promises and foul play, was held disgraceful—for that is what had happened. It showed—or seemed to show—that a new and extraordinary complacency regarding England's future in Asia had arisen in government circles: otherwise this particular question would have been very differently handled. So reasoned the crowd, talking loudly, until there had grown up another popular hallucination, rooted in elementary psychosis and elementary political feeling, regarding a matter too full of contradictions for the ordinary man to grasp.

For as regards understanding the exact importance of the many subtle moves which had taken place in far-off eastern Asia—all of which were really intimately connected with the Port Arthur incident—it is to be doubted whether more than a mere handful of this indignant general public could have expressed themselves really intelligently, in spite of their newspapers. But that was unimportant. It is by no means necessary to understand in order to be angry. Indeed, it necessarily follows that the less one understands, the more the anger can be. In any case, be this as it may, the important point in the public eye just then manifestly was that a British squadron had gracefully retired from a position of vantage for reasons which appeared both mysterious and

quixotic. Consequently a rebuff had been suffered by England in a distant part of the world which would make the nations laugh in their sleeves. This was hurtful to the racial pride of the average man, since the average man's pride of race must necessarily consist in certain vainglorious beliefs regarding his country's power and prestige. A great irritation was consequently very generally expressed against the methods of Downing Street, and a belief soon grew up that this retreat would have to be paid for by fresh humiliations. Men asked what was the use of having an expensive navy and an equally expensive diplomatic service, if neither was of value in a sharp and sudden crisis? But this was no new question.

It was, however, as yet too early to see what was going to happen ultimately in the Far East—that even the prophets as well as those most discontented willingly admitted—and as matters moved very slowly and the cabling of newspaper correspondents became gradually less and less, the passage of relatively few days was sufficient to leave only the handful aforesaid with their attention really concentrated on the problem. It is indeed impossible at this stage of the world's development for any given region to monopolize attention for more than a few days—unless there is actual war. Interests are now too varied for that. There is always something fresh in the morning papers; and the adventures, for instance, of a courtesan at Monte Carlo must be dealt with just as minutely as the affairs of an empire. To be permanently interested one must be financially interested, for is it not in the pocket that now lies the common touchstone of the world?

Peter Kerr was one of the handful whose attention remained concentrated on this far-off problem. Immersed in an unending study of maps and plans and books, he found less and less time for the society of his friends. Being full of certain ideas, he was now bent on maturing as fully and as quickly as possible a plan which seemed to him of a surprisingly original nature—a plan which, while it had great audac-

ity, was soundly conceived, and on its own merits was quite capable of being carried to a successful conclusion. As he was already a junior partner in an eminent firm of consulting engineers, his services could well be spared from all other work; and so, concentrating himself on his special problem, rapidly he passed from one stage to another until he was at last able to boast to himself that he had worked out, alone and unaided, with a completeness which he would have previously thought impossible, a general scheme which might have the most far-reaching results.

One night, having satisfied himself that he had completed as much of the work as was possible at that date, he sat down and wrote out messages to Sir James Barker and his associates saying that at three o'clock the next day he would meet them at the banker's offices and lay before them his whole scheme. Next morning, having received confirmatory replies, he allowed himself practically the first breathing-space since the memorable evening on which the newsboys had announced by their cries the possibility of a dream he had long cherished being turned into fact. Putting on a rough suit and a soft hat, he determined to seek relaxation in some rapid exercise. In his anxiety to bring to a successful conclusion the piece of work which he had set himself to accomplish, for a number of days he had hardly done more than walk a few steps. Now that he had three or four hours to himself and no cares to preoccupy him, he felt in holiday mood. He was eager to be out; he was stiff from this sedentary life; and running downstairs he was soon out-of-doors.

Swinging along at a quick pace, which gave him a new sense of exhilaration strongly satisfying to his present mood, he began instinctively to build many subsidiary castles in the air. If one did not please him, forthwith he demolished it and erected another in its place—for there are times when every man well believes that he is the architect of the gods. Even if his present scheme was not successful in its entirety, Peter

Kerr felt convinced that his premises were correct and that therefore ultimately something would come of it all. There would be really nothing wasted, and a vast experience gained.

His point of view was quite simple, and he argued soundly. In England, in Europe, there was no field left at all for anything save the improvement, the "betterment," in the market phrase, of something which had been rendered out of date by the onward march of science. Europe was comparatively speaking filled up, completed. Thousands of millions of money poured out during the strenuous nineteenth century had converted the white man's home into a dwelling-ground filled with scientific improvements. Steam, electricity, steel, and a hundred other things had become mere commonplace handmaidens serving man like the slaves of the lamp of the Arabian story-teller and emphasizing his peculiar modern ascendancy. There was almost nothing that could now not be done; it was the true age of miracles.

Yet in Asia it was quite different. Almost everything remained to be done; almost everything cried aloud for the hand of science, which would regulate, improve, and finally conquer those forces of nature which had too long been permitted to enslave mankind. Immense sums of money were necessary for this great work—sums which at first sight always seemed grotesque in the eyes of the financier, accustomed only to a careful manipulation of millions in neat little piles, and yet withal sums which were perfectly sane and admissible in the eyes of the really scientific engineer, to whom indeed money must simply be so much rough material —or wages for labour—requiring to be cast in time-abiding shapes, since money, as Ruskin has well put it, is only a promise by the state for so much labour. In India, Peter Kerr remembered, an engineer friend had recently told him that to harness the wasted river-waters properly and to drive them over the length and breadth of the country along a vast and really complete system of canals, rendering famines well-nigh impossible, a capital expenditure of at least four

hundred millions sterling was necessary—an expenditure which no government in the world, whilst present ideas were current, would dare to face.

That is to say, would not dare just now, whilst the scientific aspect of these great problems was popularly misunderstood. The engineer was still a little doubted, Peter Kerr well believed; even in Europe he had only obtained his conquests piecemeal. It was the cautious financier who was given the casting vote in matters where he should only be a tool—a means for encompassing a great end. The engineer, whilst he was really only a builder, still appeared in the popular mind as something of an iconoclast—he threw down so many old idols. This was the so-called scientific age, yet the name was obviously a misnomer. It would only be time to speak of that age when scientific truths were so diffused that the experts would not have to rely upon the benevolence of mere glorified cashiers—that is, the bankers—for the prosecution of their schemes. The people would demand—would insist on such schemes being carried out. It was still quite true to say that many essential works, vast works, which as soon as they were built would become productive, were classed in the popular mind with such vain things as the pyramids, to build a single one of which had required, according to the Greek historians, the labour of three hundred and sixty thousand men during twenty years, and which were now proved to be mere useless tombs. Now, with the resources of science and the world's accumulated wealth to draw upon, what could not an engineer accomplish in twenty years with three hundred and sixty thousand men! Of course, in his time there might only be one or two governments which would have the courage to understand this—for instance, the Russian government, also perhaps the Chinese government—governments governing hundreds of millions of people despotically. The Americans believed that they were doing great things; yet in America everything was done piecemeal and on a relatively small scale. Fancy, for instance, in modern times paying for the labour of three hundred and sixty thousand men for

twenty years, engaged on one piece of work! In Asia it would now mean at least one hundred millions sterling; in Europe, four hundred millions; in America, six or seven hundred millions. These sums were fantastic. Still, they were possible. For instance, spread over a long term of years, they would not appear in the same light as a bald statement made them appear. If any one in 1850 had told the people of England that during the next half-century a thousand millions sterling must be spent on the navy, the enraged populace would have possibly lynched the rash speaker. Yet that sum had been spent. Peter Kerr, lost in a maze of speculations and calculations, strode along more rapidly than ever, happy that he could indulge his mood.

"Good-morning, Mr. Kerr."

So immersed was he in his thoughts, that he pulled himself together with a start, much as if he had jumped back to earth from a great height. The voice had indeed sounded to him as if it were immensely off.

"Good-morning," he said a little mechanically, as he felt for his hat. Only gradually did he realize that it was Mrs. John West who was standing in front of him.

"Good-morning," she repeated again; "where were you going at such a tremendous pace, and what is the matter?"

His surprise being complete, he could think of nothing more intelligent to say than to comment on the pale sunshine which gave the sombre London park a happy and peaceful air. Certainly he was not altogether enchanted at this unexpected meeting; one can always have the earth; one cannot often soar far up into the clouds.

Meanwhile Mrs. John West watched his discomfiture in open amusement, which was mixed with something he did not understand. She plainly had no intention of letting him go.

"Surely you haven't come to look at flowers like a woman who is tired of shops and wants fresh air?" she inquired quizzically. Mrs. John West adjusted a superfluous parasol and buried her nose in a bunch of violets. She was obviously

in no hurry. Peter Kerr, now brought completely to bay, murmured something vague and wondered how he could get away. Yet his eyes noted with approval that Mrs. John West was looking uncommonly well in a dark green tailor-made dress. If it had only been another time——

"You are very mysterious to-day," said Mrs. John West, beginning to walk slowly, and bringing him perforce along with her. "It is hardly fair to expect me to do all the talking. Besides," she went on, not waiting for his answer, "you are not very polite; you have not yet answered my first question regarding what great things sent you here. You will admit, I hope, that a busy man walking fast at eleven in the morning in a park is rather strange."

Peter Kerr was silent for a minute, and then smiled. He had a pleasant smile—the sort of smile which makes women think they are at last understood.

"Not if the busy man has felt the need of exercise for days," he riposted. "Besides, think of the magnet which no man can withstand—woman!"

"How absurd you are," remarked Mrs. John West, nevertheless accepting the speech with open satisfaction. Still, she really wished to know what had brought him there, and she made up her mind to find out. Although she had known Peter Kerr for some time, it had so happened that she had never got much beyond a rather conventional intercourse with him. He was one of many who sometimes dined with her, and who met her often elsewhere. Though he could make himself decidedly interesting if the humour seized him, nothing had caused him to become detached from this indifferent crowd—to stand forth on any special eminence. Perhaps this is why she had thought that he would be a good match for somebody else. One can always be generous about things that do not acutely interest one. But since the memorable evening when both Phyllis and he had shown new possibilities, Mrs. John West had somewhat changed her point of view. Why she had done so is rather hard to explain, since all sorts of things continually mould and remould a woman's

attitude. In any case, Peter Kerr now appeared to her in a somewhat new light; and this being so, it interested her to make experiments with him.

Their slow walk had at length brought them to a bench; Mrs. John West glanced round and suddenly stopped.

"Let us sit down for a bit," she said, "unless I really stopped you as you were rushing headlong to some important goal."

Peter Kerr pulled out his watch and smiled again. It was impossible to say what his smile might mean.

"There is an important goal," he confessed at length, a little reluctantly, as he looked up at her, "but I have two whole hours to waste before I need reach it. Therefore with the greatest pleasure I will sit down."

"You are not very consequential or logical in spite of your deliberations," she rejoined as she made room for him. "First you show a blank, speechless astonishment at seeing me; then you assure me that I was the magnet which drew you here; and lastly you look at your watch and confess—reluctantly—that you have two hours to waste before you reach your goal. The case against you is complete, you see," she concluded, as she examined her violets. "What is your defence?"

Peter Kerr laughed. He wondered to himself whether it would be wise to be quite frank.

"I have no defence; the prisoner throws himself on the mercy of the court."

Mrs. John West had singled out a small cluster of flowers from her violets and now suddenly turned.

"I knew my suspicions were correct," she said. "Still, I will reward you—or rather, commute your punishment in a way you certainly do not deserve. I am going to encourage you to tell me more."

Mrs. John West's voice was unusually soft. It has already been written that a buttonhole, carefully inserted by an attractive woman, has often been the beginning of many fateful things. Peter Kerr, caught by a sudden train of thought, watched the operation with sudden interest. It was very pleasant after his hard work to trifle like this; he was not

sorry that his buttonhole was proving highly unreasonable, and he wondered how long it would last.

Just then, however, Mrs. John West completed her task, and with a little sigh she let her hands drop. Perhaps it was not entirely the stubborn buttonhole which was responsible for the colour in her cheeks.

"I declare," she exclaimed inconsequentially, "we are both very foolish this morning—sitting on this bench and frittering the time away. I wonder what people would think if they saw us here."

"Why do people always bother about what other people think?" remonstrated Kerr.

"It is you, however, who are morally responsible," Mrs. John West went on, leaving his question unanswered and tracing a design on the ground with the tip of her parasol. "For it is quite plain that if you had not turned up I should now be gazing at the flower-beds, or doing something equally simple-minded. Whereas now——"

"Whereas now," echoed Peter Kerr, "pray go on to the end of the chapter." He wondered what she would say, for he had become quite reconciled to sitting down, and had lost all memory of his first irritation.

"How inquisitive you are," returned Mrs. John West. "I am sure I don't know what I was going to say, and even if I did I might not say it." She stopped, looked at him—then smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"That is too bad," murmured Peter Kerr, openly disappointed; "I thought at least that you might talk to me in parables. Yet when you are about to become really interesting you stop dead—you baulk—like a hunter that refuses. It is aggravating, even," he continued, half to himself. "I believe I would like to see you jump at something bad."

Mrs. John West laughed easily.

"An unwilling horse—and a mare at that—you know, should never be forced. She should be coaxed."

"I disagree," said Peter Kerr severely. He spoke in such a way that she could not be certain whether he was adhering

to the same figure of speech. "I myself believe in the whip, sometimes."

"Ah!" said Mrs. West, a little vaguely. Instinctively her mind recurred to what had been constantly said about Peter Kerr's disposition. She studied his profile furtively as he looked away, and she wondered what sort of man he really was. Why had he said that?

"The whip, you must remember," she said aloud, as if she had been only reflecting on what he had said, "invariably produces one result: it breeds viciousness."

Peter Kerr turned round.

"Either that is very subtle," he said, "or else——"

"Or else," repeated Mrs. John West curiously.

"Or else," he concluded, "it is just metaphorical."

Mrs. John West looked so plainly disappointed that Peter Kerr laughed cheerfully. It seemed to him that things might become amusing just because each could not quite decide about the other.

"It is your own fault," he explained, stabbing the ground with his stick. "I have only borrowed your method. If you had not taught it to me, I should not be so elusive this peaceful morning. I dare say, even, that I should be blunt."

He paused and observed his companion. She too was making holes in the ground with her parasol point. The situation had not advanced at all. She had stopped him in his rapid walk; she had shown herself most pleasant and trifling; he had not been serious in return. Perhaps it was that which annoyed her.

"You have suddenly become very silent," he said encouragingly. "You brought yourself to a jump; you baulked; I suggested the whip; you alleged that it would only make you vicious."

"Never be sure of a woman," she replied, seizing the opening. "Or else—and please observe that this time I am following your alleged method and finishing bluntly—you may be badly disappointed. Yes, my friend," she repeated with reflective emphasis, "badly disappointed, I warn you."

Peter Kerr, nothing dismayed at the warning, glanced at his companion in secret amusement. He had followed her thoughts without difficulty, and knew exactly why she had changed her tone.

"Why have you become so ominous?" he inquired. "There is no real reason why a woman should be more disappointing to a man than a man to a woman. It is only a popular fiction, I believe. The weaker vessel is only weaker in one sense. In another she is certainly much stronger, and that is most noticeable where man is concerned. Therefore it follows from that that so far from being disappointing she is exactly the reverse."

"You seem to know us very well," interjected Mrs. John West, avoiding further argument, "for a man of—how much?"

"Of thirty-four and four months exactly," Peter Kerr filled in.

"That is strange," she rejoined pensively. "You are then exactly one year younger than I am."

"What singular good luck—I mean that we are both so young. We have thus both of us at least a few more years to run before the grand climacteric of the French cynic."

She looked up, a little puzzled.

" 'After forty, women tire of being moral and men of being honest,' " quoted Peter Kerr.

"Oh, that!" rejoined Mrs. John West with a shrug of indifference. "That is surely out-of-date. All age-limits have long ago been abolished: such things belong to a less sophisticated century. I am sure that in five years I shall not feel the slightest bit differently from what I do to-day."

Peter Kerr observed that Mrs. John West's eyes were quite serious now. Something prompted him to make a similar confession.

"I can certainly conceive of circumstances," he said slowly, "when a man of thirty-four would do most things rather more thoroughly than any man of forty. It might be neces-

sary—absolutely necessary—and, as we are taught even at school, necessity knows no law. Also, being physically more active at thirty-four than at forty, one should be much more daring. I have never really understood why that particular age should have been singled out. It was a little simple-minded on the part of the cynic, I am afraid. *I* should have made the age thirty."

"The hour for confidence has manifestly arrived," laughed Mrs. John West, regaining her first mood; "you speak as if you were contemplating robbing a bank!"

"Well, perhaps I do," confessed Peter Kerr, instinctively thinking of his scheme.

After this they began talking more easily, and a solemn policeman who passed presently went his way with an amused look on his face. Mrs. John West was enjoying herself, for she was being entertained; and in her enjoyment she forgot to ask Peter Kerr the many questions she had in her mind. Though she had the power and means to do most things that took her fancy, she was seldom entirely happy, for much admiration and little love is really a diet as unsatisfying to the soul as much drink and little food is to the body. This Mrs. John West had realized some time ago. There was the estimable John West, of course, but her marriage with him was a somewhat longstanding affair, and in any case John West was now so wholly absorbed in the money-markets that he had scant time for his wife. Mrs. John West was a fair representative of the great modern problem—the problem of the rich wife who was not married yesterday, and who somehow finds less and less to do and interest her from year to year. It is a problem which is considered shocking when it should only be considered serious; it is a problem which is the fault of every one and the fault of no one; it is a problem which will never be solved and therefore which will ever be considered; it is a problem which begins in maturity and ends only in—old age.

So it happened that Mrs. John West made herself so interesting that it was the merest chance which caused Peter

Kerr's hands at length to steal to his waistcoat and seek his watch.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed suddenly under his breath as he realized the hour.

"What is it?" inquired his companion anxiously.

"Pardon me," he said, getting up quickly, "but the minutes have literally flown. You have conjured them away. Do you know that it is already past half-past one? I am now in the odd predicament that I have one hour and twenty minutes to get home; to lunch; to gather a mass of papers together; and finally to go three miles to settle the most important business I have ever settled."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. John West, now quite serious, "can you do it?"

"I shall try," he replied.

Mrs. John West put out her hand.

"Do not wait—fly," she said with an encouraging smile; "and," she called after him, "tell me all about it when next we meet."

Peter Kerr almost ran, whilst Mrs. John West walked very slowly in the direction of her carriage. She was thinking a good deal.

CHAPTER III

"Les Angloys s'amusent moult tristement."
Anglo-Norman Saying.

THE bank over which Sir James Barker presided was not housed in one of those impressive buildings which at once convey to the stranger a sense of the mightiness of capital. Indeed, since the bank was more concerned with foreign than with domestic business, the directorate had never deemed it necessary to give much thought to outward appearances, and consequently their affairs had grown vastly during two strenuous decades without any corresponding change in their premises. The natural result was that any wayfarer who might stop and glance casually through the outer doors of the establishment at the somewhat narrow space given up to the public counters would certainly carry away a totally false view of the resources of this institution—resources which had frankly astonished the staid world of Lombard Street in the particular instance of the launching of an ill-timed but essential South American Loan, which had fallen quite flat on the market and had therefore placed on the bank the onus of finding at a few days' notice the major part of six millions sterling. Sir James Barker had managed to do that in a way which had certainly enhanced his reputation as an underwriter; for although it was generally known that he had the most intimate relations with some of the great Paris banks, not even Lombard Street had suspected that on a tight market he could draw with such rapidity and ease on resources possessing an historic and well-deserved reputation.

The consequence was that on the Thursday afternoon in question, though there remained a great deal of business to be settled that day, the small group who had interested

themselves in the outlines of the scheme drawn up by Peter Kerr found it convenient to be at the bank punctually at three o'clock. They knew that Sir James Barker had a peculiar flair, or instinct, for discovering new and profitable fields of enterprise. Furthermore, it was admitted that his large and varied relations with all the great money-markets of the world allowed him nearly always to secure himself against loss by a clever pooling of his interests with those of business rivals whenever an independent victory had become impossible. Twice he had done this with remarkable skill when everything was against him. There was nothing, indeed, in the strategy and tactics of international capitalistic warfare which was not as familiar to him as his A B C, and he was consequently a man who could enlist co-operation almost everywhere.

It was consequently a matter of surprise and annoyance to Sir James Barker when at least ten minutes passed by in fitful conversation before there was any sign of Peter Kerr, though the hour of meeting had arrived. It was one of those moments when any cooling of the hot iron is manifestly unfortunate, since eagerness is the essential condition of the successful schemer; and therefore the banker frowningly looked at the clock and wondered what could have happened. He had special reasons for wishing prompt action: he had received warnings that the field would not be clear for very long.

A spatter of horse's hoofs, ringing sharply above the hum of the busy street, apprised him that the situation had been fortunately saved before it was too late; and an instant later, Peter Kerr, now clad immaculately, and carrying a great stack of papers under both arms, entered the room rapidly and expressed many apologies for the inconvenience he had caused. As he took out and pointed to his watch as the real culprit, Sir James Barker—for an instant—had a vague recollection that he had seen him do much the same thing before. He wondered whether this was a constitutional failing of Kerr's. It was strange to associate a lack of

exactitude with a man at the top of his profession. Still, it might be a little-suspected fault. The big banker had a thought at the back of his head which he could not quite get at just then.

Sir James Barker's reflections were cut short by Peter Kerr's movements. Rapidly he hung several maps and enormous plans over some other maps which lined the walls of the directorial sanctum; and then, smoothing out his papers in front of him, he begged for half an hour's careful attention whilst he went over the main details of the scheme which he had to explain to them. Sir James Barker's friends had already distributed themselves in such fashion as to be able to follow his remarks and his explanations on the maps and plans; nothing remained but to begin promptly.

Kerr opened the meeting by explaining rapidly some necessary points which he wished to be properly understood regarding the extension of the Indian railway system and the results this had had both for the Indian government and for the financiers who had interested themselves in creating a network of lines which now measured no less than 22,000 miles of railway. It was necessary to draw this parallel, he said, for a large number of reasons. In India, the initial difficulties to be overcome had been of quite a different nature to those he would soon be referring to in the case in China, but still, though different, they were in a sense allied to the problem he must solve; and if the results of a number of years' working had been somewhat unsatisfactory for the great British Dependency, it was because the methods followed there were rather primitive. In the first place, though in India over-capitalization was a sin which had been guarded against, it would have been better and cheaper to have boldly adopted a uniform system at once at all costs in place of the mixed system with various gauges and with the poor and conflicting control such as now existed. As they were all well aware, in India there were state lines built and worked by the state; other lines built by the state but worked by companies; a third class of railways both built

and worked by so-called guaranteed companies; again, other railways built by semi-independent companies; and, apart from these, in the native states there were thousands of miles of lines operated on three or four different systems. All sorts of government restrictions also existed—restrictions which still further complicated a very intricate problem. The result roughly was that although 22,000 miles of railway had only apparently cost three thousand million rupees or some £200,000,000 sterling—not a very excessive expenditure, amounting, as it did, to only some £9,000 per mile—the average net return on the capital invested in a vast and rich country even now was only between four and a half and five per cent., which, bearing in mind the fact that much of the system was poor and antiquated and would have to be modernized sooner or later, and that betterments had been hitherto indulged in, was highly unsatisfactory. In England, he would remind them, where they had over-capitalized their railways to a very dangerous extent, the figure of the gross annual earning was approximately one hundred millions sterling, leaving a net earning of more than four per cent. on the eleven hundred and fifty millions invested. This home result was therefore far more happy than the Indian result, though the reverse would have been the case had India's real interests been properly safeguarded by a bold and scientific government policy.

Now the scheme he proposed to lay before them as a practical and sound scheme was one to which he had given the name provisionally of the Linked Chinese Trunk Lines. It was designed to save China from having her railway affairs fall into the confusion of the Indian railways. As they well knew, developments had lately taken place in the Far East of a very remarkable nature, and though it was far from clear whether Russia and Germany were really acting in concert with each other, as had been generally surmised, the latest reports forecasted that conventions would soon be extorted from China practically ceding the entire Port Arthur territory to Russia and the Kiaochow territory to

Germany. He was not so much concerned with these territorial acquisitions as he was with something else. From early information he had received, he was certain that behind the acquisition of these naval ports, together with the adjoining hinterland, lay great railway schemes; in fact, so far as Russia was concerned they had not only that curious document, the so-called Cassini Convention, which had shown how much importance Russia attached to railway power in the Far East, but they had now copies of the Manchurian Railway Convention—an instrument which conceded to Russia the unqualified right to traverse Manchuria from west to east with a broad-gauge railway leading from the Baikal provinces into the Pacific stronghold of Vladivostock. This meant the building of more than a thousand miles of Russian railways within the limits of Chinese territory. It was certain that as soon as Russia began the construction of this line, she would equally demand the right to connect the harbour of Port Arthur with this new system; otherwise Port Arthur would have little strategic value. In other words, as soon as a new convention with China was signed, Port Arthur would be brought as speedily as possible into direct railway communication with St. Petersburg; and what Russia did Germany would try to imitate as closely as possible.

In other words, a railway scramble had already begun in the Chinese Empire, and it was imperative that British interests, instead of pausing helplessly and wondering what had really prompted the government to give way over the Port Arthur question, plunged at once into the fray and made the best of an intricate situation. He had on the table twelve sets of his completed scheme, which in his belief might do for England what Russia was doing for herself. This scheme was briefly: first, to build one grand trunk line from the capital Peking to Canton; then to continue it so as to meet a light railway which would run from Hankow—the main city on the great Yang-tse River—through the two provinces of Sze-chuen and Yun-nan into

Burmah. These two combined lines would measure 3,500 miles and would unite British territory in the south permanently with the Chinese Empire. In addition there must be a second trunk line leading from Tientsin—the great trading mart of the north—directly to Shanghai, and then running along the banks of the Yang-tse to Hankow. This system, with its feeders, duly provided for in his plans, would measure another 2,000 miles. Combined with these main lines would be seventeen additional feeder lines measuring 1,000 miles more of track. These 6,500 miles of railway would virtually secure England in China in a way no diplomatic agreements could, for no concession would be asked for save a building-concession—each length of railway being surrendered to Chinese control as soon as construction was completed, the Syndicate relying entirely on the good faith and unimpeachable credit of the Chinese government for the safeguarding of their interests and capital. This action could only have one result—it would bind China firmly to English interests, and the greater the pressure of other nations, the more would China necessarily lean on England.

Peter Kerr paused for a minute, to answer some questions, before he quickly plunged into a further maze of details, financial, technical, and diplomatic. As he talked he passed sheet after sheet of estimates and figures round the table, illustrating what he said by giving explanations regarding the maps and plans on the wall behind him and then coming back to the point and tracing each step with remarkable lucidity. At last he stopped and dropped into his chair.

"That, gentlemen," he finished, "is my scheme. Virtually it is the railway conquest of China by common-sense methods."

The voices of the half-dozen men present rose at once in an animated discussion. Sir James Barker, looking round the room, thought a unanimous vote of approval of the scheme certain until his eyes lighted on Mr. Charles Marten's face. Mr. Charles Marten was the London head of the important

Oriental Corporation, a concern which had the most intimate relations not only with China but in fact with all the Far East. In a way his support was essential. Sir James Barker was puzzled at his attitude. Already this gentleman was shaking his head disapprovingly.

"What is it, Marten?" he said genially. "You don't seem to agree. As you know a good deal more about China than we do, give us your opinion."

Marten, a little doubtful how to act best for interests desirous of retaining their virtual monopoly in the Far East, hesitated a minute, and then got up and walked across to where an ordinary large-scale map of China was hanging.

"Well, you see," he began jerkily, "although I am, of course, anxious to help along anything of this nature I can, the fact is this scheme seems too big to me; it covers too much country and would therefore not be acceptable either to the Chinese authorities or to our own people. Even assuming that Kerr's figures are correct, and that the lines could be built as cheaply as he has estimated—a thing which I very much doubt—there is a matter of considerably more than fifty millions sterling involved. I doubt whether that sum could be raised, considering the position in the Far East, from our public during the next few years, even on the most favourable terms. Besides that there is the main question of the Chinese approval. I believe the whole scheme would frighten the Peking government from the very start. Our enemies, if they got wind of it, as they most certainly would, sooner or later, could easily show the Chinese how we meant to gobble up their country and make another India of it. The mandarins believe anything—when it suits them—and some lines, especially that line into Burmah, would frighten them just from seeing it on the map in thick red the way Kerr has filled it in. I think, therefore, that a smaller scheme, a considerably smaller scheme, would be better. And whilst on this subject, I may tell you that my own people and our friends of the Indian Commercial Bank, who have also large China interests, have

already taken some preliminary action." And with that Mr. Marten concluded abruptly, as if in doubt whether he ought to say any more.

Kerr, who had listened to this with considerable irritation, now picked up a pencil and wrote something on a scrap of paper, which he passed across to Sir James Barker. Marten flushed with anger as he saw the action, and slowly walked from the map back to the table. The others, suddenly conscious that a duel had commenced, drew themselves up in their chairs and keenly watched the protagonists.

"What do you understand, Kerr?" said Marten at length, with great deliberation, as if he had been considering Kerr's action.

Peter Kerr, before answering, glanced across to Sir James Barker, who frowningly still held the scrap in his hand. The big banker shrugged his shoulders in indifference, as if he cared very little how far Peter Kerr went. Yet though he had decided to back him whether any of the others formed a pool with him or not, he was secretly angry that this complication should have arisen. Kerr stood up very slowly.

"I think," he said in a grim sort of way as he looked round, "we have General Shaw to thank for this. He is on the board of the Indian Commercial, and I should imagine that he has learnt some details of my scheme and has simply adopted them for the benefit of his colleagues. It is doubtless complimentary on his part to have acted in this way, but withal it is a little—a little——"

Peter Kerr paused for a minute as he sought for a word, and instantly his mind recurred to his morning in the park. It was curious how infectious this pausing for words could become; at this particular juncture it was embarrassing.

"You have not finished what you were going to say, Mr. Kerr," said Mr. Charles Marten, a little roughly, using the prefix for the first time. He was getting openly angry.

Peter Kerr surveyed him for an instant and suddenly fixed

on the word. He would not show his hand—not yet, at least.

"It was a little unbusiness-like, that is all," he slowly concluded. Mr. Charles Marten, foiled in his attempt to provoke him, hesitated a moment and finally stood up, as if he were about to leave the room.

"One moment, please."

It was Jerkins, the American financier, who had spoken—Jerks, as he was already familiarly known in the city, because of his amazing popularity. He had started to his feet at the same time as Marten, and with a rapid movement had stepped back from the table so as to stand nearly beside him. Now he began speaking in his sharp, pointed way, which always carried so much conviction.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this meeting is becoming very irregular. We met here to listen to the proposals of our mutual friend Mr. Kerr, but for some reason Mr. Marten has become dissatisfied and angry and proposes to leave before any decision has been arrived at. Now to my mind this whole railway project is a very important scheme, and the details which Mr. Kerr has disclosed to us cannot be carried away by any one of us and put to his own use. They belong to Mr. Kerr—to Mr. Kerr's brain—and his copyright must be protected. I think, then, that we are justified in demanding that Mr. Marten give us a solemn promise that what he has heard to-day is strictly confidential, and that under no circumstances is he authorized to disclose it to third parties. Have I your support, gentlemen?"

An emphatic murmur of approval showed that Mr. Jerkins had effectively isolated Mr. Marten by his prompt action. Without giving serious offence to them all, the dissentient could not leave the room with liberty to disclose what he had learnt to his fellow-directors. For a moment, indeed, Mr. Marten hesitated; then, remembering that the combination was too strong for him, with an effort he controlled himself, and assured those present that though he felt it impossible to become a party to the scheme, he would not

allow a word to pass his lips of what he had heard. After which, curtly excusing himself, he took up his hat and left the room.

A little silence succeeded his departure, but the shutting of an outer door assuring them that this obstructionist was finally out of the way, Jerkins broke into a roar of laughter and tilted himself comfortably back in his chair.

"Now that we can talk as amongst friends," he began easily, "of all the jays I have ever seen, give me that fellow Marten. He beats everything. Of course his people want this thing—in little instalments to suit their little public—that is as clear as daylight; and his coming here and listening carefully to everything looks to me like a put-up job. Well, we will beat him as sure as my name is Jerks for short, eh, Barker?"

Sir James Barker's face was set in a grim smile. He nodded approvingly to the American, who had not only been for some time closely associated with him in various enterprises, but for whom he had also a warm personal regard. Jerkins, they said in the city, played the game as straight as any man could, and, as those who know anything of the higher finance are well aware, it is very necessary that in big matters there should be complete faith. Honour among company-promoters is as essential as among less enterprising folk.

Sir James Barker now handled a large sheet of foolscap on which were a number of typewritten figures.

"Gentlemen," he said, dropping instinctively into a formal tone as he spoke of money, "I will now pass on to the other details. We need £100,000 nominally to deal with this scheme. Of this sum £10,000 paid up will be ample for the moment. The rest may not be needed for several months. I propose that we form a syndicate consisting of one hundred shares of £1,000 each. Kerr will have ten free shares, to be counted as fully paid up. The other ninety we will split among ourselves. I am willing to take as many as you like, if there is any difficulty."

There was, however, no such difficulty. Indeed, as Jerkins had friends in New York whom he proposed to interest at once in the matter, there was a sharp battle as to how many shares he could take. He pointed out that it would be very useful to let him have a big interest which he could re-parcel among his friends, as then the co-operation of the American government might be insured in case of need. He thought there could be no question of loss—they were bound to get their money back.

After some further discussion everything was gradually smoothed out and rough minutes were drawn up. There would be plenty of time to develop the plan of campaign gradually, now that the initial difficulty had been overcome.

Left alone to finish up the necessary details and prepare all the numerous documents, Peter Kerr had a sudden feeling of exultation. He had had an eventful day; he was pleased with himself. If he could bring this thing off it would be a master-stroke indeed. Refusing all help, he remained there long after Barker had left, working and unceasingly thinking. If he could only bring this off——

That same evening Mrs. John West, full of certain ideas, addressed her husband in a manner characteristic of women who must be obeyed.

"John," she remarked briefly, "are Belgians reliable people—I mean, can one trust them in money matters?"

"That is rather a large order, Alice," replied John West, putting his paper down reluctantly for a minute. "Let me understand you. Are you asking me as an abstract proposition whether the Belgian nation is financially sound, or do you simply mean you wish to find out whether a certain individual has a good reputation?"

"How stupid men always are!" murmured his wife by way of reply, whilst she stared at the back of the newspaper, which once more formed an effective mask. Then she made up her mind to be guardedly frank. "You know that

Colonel Maes has told me that if I care to trust him he may be able to quadruple my money in a year."

John West whistled sarcastically from behind his paper screen.

"I wish I could do that," he commented. "But, my dear woman, the thing is impossible—keep your money."

His wife smiled a superior smile which he did not see.

"John," she said in a manner which she specially reserved for him, "I don't propose to teach you anything new about finance, but if you were not so interested in that wretched newspaper it might dawn on you that Colonel Maes proposes to let me into some new venture before the public knows anything about it. And then——"

Involuntarily John West sat up sharply and abandoned his reading. This sounded like business.

"Oh, I remember now," he remarked, thoughtfully looking at her. "Then they are getting some of their money over here. I have heard one or two whispers."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. John West irritably. She was sorry now that she had spoken.

"Why, those Chinese railways, of course. Still, if you do put any of your money in with the Belgians, I advise you to keep very quiet about it. You know what people are."

"Everybody speculates nowadays," announced Mrs. John West a little irrelevantly, looking at her rings and thinking of Peter Kerr. Her husband shrugged his shoulders and got up to get another paper. He had learnt wisdom long ago.

Things always move all at once or not at all. So it happened that almost precisely at the same hour as this little scene was proceeding, Mrs. May came home after a long afternoon.

"There you are, Phyllis," she remarked, as if surprised. Mrs. May was one of those people who are always being surprised at nothing in particular. "It is such a pity you wouldn't come out to-day. I have such a lot to tell you.

There was a regular foreign invasion at Lady Watling's, and, just imagine, I had to talk French for quite half an hour with nobody to help me with those wretched verbs. There was one man I took quite a liking to. He never laughed once at my mistakes. He is going to call, if he can find time."

"Who is the man?" inquired Phyllis indifferently, when her mother finally paused to take breath.

"A Belgian—a certain Colonel Maes, who is the leading spirit in some great enterprise in China."

Mrs. May was engaged in taking off her hat and did not notice the sudden change in Phyllis.

"I have heard of that man," she said slowly, trying to recall when and how. "Somebody told me something about him which was not good. I remember his name particularly because it is pronounced like that river in Belgium. How did you find out that he was going to China?"

Mrs. May looked suddenly at Phyllis, and then went on in her impassive manner:

"I never said he was going to China, my dear. But I heard him asking Mrs. John West if she had made up her mind to have that little gamble he had proposed; and then I heard him say that he was sure China was going to prove much richer than Africa had been."

Phyllis hesitated, but only for a moment. She remembered now what she had heard about the man.

"And what did Mrs. John West answer?"

"She laughed a little at his eager manner and told him that she would let him know exactly in a few days, as there was still plenty of time."

"How interesting!" said Phyllis, getting up presently and moving away with studied indifference. But her heart was beating fast; for she knew now that something eventful was preparing, and her woman's intuition told her to beware.

CHAPTER IV.

"Dans les premières passions, les femmes aiment l'amant; dans les autres elles aiment l'amour."
LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

MRS. JOHN WEST'S invitations had been so largely accepted that by half-past five her house was crowded to suffocation-point. Not that any one cared very much about the music with which they were to be regaled—they were a good deal too civilized for that, as the inevitable German professor observed in irony to his hostess. But as the house was very spacious, and one always met all sorts and conditions of people in it, Mrs. John West's entertainments were voted really worth going to; for the amusement they afforded was in sharp contrast to the dullness of the general run of such affairs. The art of entertaining, it may be observed, has now been largely overdone; and the novelty of holding mass-meetings in other people's houses has undoubtedly departed. Once upon a time there may have been *salons;* now they are mainly scuffles.

Still, if the modern hostess is fortunate enough to know certain incontrovertible truths, all is not yet lost. One of the great secrets of success undoubtedly lies in the judicious handling of companies of men confronted by battalions of women. If the men become frightened victory incontestably remains with the big battalions; if, on the other hand, the unity, energy, and numbers of the fair ones are met in the way they should be met, military science can borrow a brilliant lesson from the drawing-rooms of the moderns. And thus it happened that Mrs. John West, who had the gift of setting people at ease, moving from group to group, was soon happy with the feeling that once more she was successful where so many others failed. The music, it

was true, was hardly listened to, but that was a detail to her so long as people were happy.

Peter Kerr slipped in very late to this genial gathering, taking care not to be buttonholed by any of the knots of men standing at the doors. He had no desire to be interrogated as to what was keeping him so much to himself, so he observed the utmost reserve. Paragraphs had somehow already crept into some of the papers regarding a great scheme which was being prepared by his firm, and had excited general curiosity. Sir James Barker had been much annoyed at his name being mentioned in the same connection, and had repeatedly insisted to Kerr on the necessity of preserving absolute secrecy. Kerr himself had been much puzzled at the prevalence of these rumours, but he had been too busy to go about trying to trace their origin, and so had contented himself with making indignant denials. The idea that he was being watched annoyed him—it showed him how much he would have to contend with when he really got to work. For if it was like this at this end, what would it be like on the battle-ground to which he must soon proceed?

He exchanged greetings and a fire of small talk with numbers of people who were driven in little eddies against him, as he slowly made his way forward; and gradually in this new atmosphere of gaiety and unconcern he lost his newly-acquired self-consciousness which was so disagreeable to him. He inquired vainly for his hostess at frequent intervals; but no one had seen her lately, and in the present crush it was hopeless to attempt to find her. So he contented himself with making himself agreeable to such people as showed a desire to stop an instant and talk to him, all the while hunting both for those he wished to avoid and those he wished to see.

Whilst he was standing more or less happily entrenched behind an eminently safe-looking matron, whose broad back shielded him from the possibility of undesirable frontal attacks, he felt some one punch him humorously. He

turned quickly with a muttered apology as he bumped against his barricade, and found himself face to face with Blessington—a happy youth who, thanks to the efforts of previous generations, was engaged in passing through life in joyous idleness. Blessington eyed him with a merry twinkle, as if he divined his defensive attitude and wished speedily to undermine it.

"Lucky beggar!" he murmured confidentially, winking at the same time. "I hear you are going to strike it rich—a regular gold-mine, they say, which will give you millions and influence and adventures and all that sort of thing. Also I hear," he continued mischievously, as he saw the frown settling down on Peter Kerr's face, "that later on—eventually—we may expect you to take unto yourself a wife—a girl, in fact, who has just been making outrageous remarks to me. May I congratulate you?"

Blessington paused a minute, surveying his man with innocent delight. He liked Kerr, though he did not quite understand him and thought him serious. He was therefore delighted to find him so placed that no amount of studied reserve, or even anger, could beat him off. Here, in this crowded drawing-room, he had Kerr at a complete disadvantage, and the idea tickled him immensely.

"May I congratulate you?" repeated the young man, as Kerr did not answer.

Kerr looked grimly for a moment into Blessington's smiling face. He was on the point of becoming angry when a new idea struck him. He could turn the incident to much better account; it was an excellent opportunity indeed.

"You are a young devil," he said, beginning to smile in spite of himself, "that is, a regular young wolf in sheep's clothing. Still, at least you can do me the service of letting me know how you found out all this interesting news."

As he spoke, involuntarily he became serious again. Blessington, however, was in high spirits and purposely misunderstood him.

"How I found out," he replied indifferently, "I heard

that it was all arranged the other night—in this house, in fact—and that though you jibbed at first at the idea of giving up your bachelor state, in the end you capitulated."

Peter Kerr seized Blessington by both arms.

"Don't be too foolish," he said quite gravely. "I don't really care about *that*. You may gossip all you like about me if it pleases you, but what I want to know is the other thing. Who told you about the scheme—my scheme?"

"Oh," said Blessington, with a look of real surprise coming over his face, "it is true then—the scheme, I mean? It was rather a long shot of mine, I confess, for I only overheard that old ass from India, General Shaw, gassing to a lot of fellows about it. There he is over there."

Blessington pointed an explanatory finger across the room. Certainly it was General Shaw—red and sultry as usual, and still engaged in talking to a small group of men who were attentively listening to him.

"It was Shaw, was it?" commented Peter Kerr, mechanically clenching his fists. "This is a real service, Blessington, and I am much obliged to you. I will have a big account to settle one day." He paused and gazed at Blessington's face very reflectively. "A big account," he repeated.

"Oh," rejoined the other, "I hope I have not made trouble."

He was a little disturbed at the turn things had taken. Though he was supremely thoughtless, he had no malice, and now he appeared genuinely sorry.

"I hope I haven't made trouble," he repeated anxiously, as Peter Kerr stood there motionless.

"No," said Peter Kerr finally, as if he had now examined the question in all its bearings, "you have not made trouble—in fact, you have done me yeoman service. I begin to see how things are moving. I should be much obliged to you if you could hint to a certain number of people that General Shaw is spreading irresponsible stories about me as a result of a serious difference we have had. If you can do that," he went on slowly, "later on, if you care for it, I will remember you if my scheme comes off."

"Anything to oblige you, old chap," said Blessington, showing relief in his eager voice, "and anything also for a shy at the Almighty Dollar. The fact is, you know," he went on in confidential tones, "I wouldn't mind adding a bit to what the paternal riches bring me in. Things are devilish expensive nowadays, and what looks first-class when one is twenty-one is not so very big when one is twenty-five. I tremble to think of the prospect when I am full thirty. I cannot open a bonnet-shop; to work I am too lazy. Pity me, please! However, I understand. I will do some talking, and later on you will remember me?"

Kerr assented, and began talking about several things he would like him to say. He told him exactly how it had happened that some people would like to make trouble for him, and then, without going into too many details, he made Blessington aware of his approaching departure.

"Won't you let me into the secret?"

Kerr wheeled sharply as he heard the question, without concluding what he was saying to his new ally. It was Mrs. John West once more who had found him before he had found her. Now she stood watching him with a challenging smile as he murmured his excuses.

"You are very late," she remarked reproachfully, stopping him short. "Everybody is beginning to go."

"All the better," he replied with gallantry, "for then it may be possible to have a little word alone with you. Now——" He made a gesture of despair at the crowd of people who were openly waiting for an opportunity to separate them.

"I will remember," said Mrs. John West with a little nod as she moved off.

He watched her moving from group to group for several minutes in much the same surprise as he had experienced the last time he had met her. Why had he been so blind previously, he wondered. She was dressed in a dress softened with lace, which seemed to cling to her and added much to the attractiveness of her full figure. She appeared to him

more soft and yielding than when he had met her in the park on his morning walk, and he realized that there was within him a growing feeling of annoyance that his affairs—that his great idea—should not only have absorbed so much of his time recently, but that he should soon have to go far away and become lost to this world. It was only now, with his departure looming up very close, that everything stood out clearly—that he understood what he was leaving—and what he was going to. What if the men who opposed his scheme were right and it would all be proved a wild-goose chase consuming a great deal of his time—many months, if not years? Things were somehow very pleasant just now, and he was wise enough to know that one cannot be to-morrow just as one is to-day. He might come back soured, disappointed, finding pleasure in nothing. One's progress through life is marked by successive stages of development—stages which often look like permanent stopping-places, until one is suddenly taught that there can be no such things and that everything indeed in the world is subject to the same laws of methodical growth—and decay. He suspected that if he flung himself into the struggle, no matter whether it proved successful or unsuccessful, he would be a very different man when it was over, and would look on everything in the light of his greater experience. That would mean that his eyes would see differently—that possibly he would have a distaste for hundreds of things—that——

Peter Kerr, travelling along the border-line of the intangible, was brought back suddenly and unquestionably to realities by bumping into something distinctly concrete; and to his surprise he found that he had inadvertently been trying to push through the back of a chair on which was seated no other person than Phyllis May. His surprise was really genuine.

"Well, that is kind of you," began Phyllis as she twisted herself round to see to whom she was indebted for this unexpected assault. "I believe you could have done it if you had tried a little harder; I mean you could have actually

pushed clean through and landed me on the floor. Was it a bet?"

Phyllis, in spite of herself, began laughing. She wanted to be quite serious, but somehow it was impossible.

"I am awfully sorry," replied Peter Kerr, feeling that a great many things were somehow happening that day, for no particular reason, and that it would have been wiser if he had stayed away. "Though I am apparently disorderly, I can assure you, if that is any satisfaction, that I am not drunk. What I was doing was really merely figurative—I was debating to myself on the curious way one pushes along through life——"

"I hope," said Phyllis, suddenly interrupting him in her quick way, "that you will note how much of an obstacle I can be—both involuntarily and figuratively, of course, I mean." She was always saying things that few men understood as she meant them to be understood, and which came back to her like boomerangs.

"You are worth tripping over, I assure you," returned Kerr with a laugh and a bow.

"Is that a compliment?" she answered, now wondering how her own remark had sounded. "If it is, it is one of those things which might be said a little more felicitously. You should have denied the possibility of my being tripped over."

She looked at him quickly and then suddenly coloured faintly.

"Your touch is too light for this crush; only the blunt method has effect here," he returned, as, suiting the action to the word, he deliberately warded off some one who was stepping on his heels.

"It is a little trying," Phyllis confessed, getting up. "Do you mind taking me to some less combative spot? Your last assault on my chair has shaken my nerves, I believe."

Phyllis's eyes were sparkling in a way which belied her words as Peter Kerr forced a lane for her through the crowd. If she had not forgotten, at least she had buried the memory

of the keen disappointment which had assailed her so few evenings before, and, whether she liked to admit it or not, somehow this man satisfied her more than other men from the very moment she saw him. Phyllis would have laughed at the idea that she was in love; she did not quite know whether she believed in love at all, in fact—in the ordinary blind and stupid sense. Yet she had always been conscious that there is such a thing as affinity, which may seem a distinction without a difference, but which is nevertheless not so.

"This is pleasant," confessed Kerr a minute later, as he leaned back and gazed thoughtfully at Phyllis. He had managed to find a quiet spot where they were not likely to be disturbed, and there was something peculiarly restful about Phyllis which pleased him just then more than it had ever pleased him before. She seemed far removed from hard effort and the striving after things which only turn to ashes. She made him feel restful—satisfied—happier—and so, suddenly and spontaneously, his heart went out to her in a way which he could not explain.

"I am not going to entertain you, so you must not mind," he continued a little irrelevantly. "I feel to-day as moody as a woman. Perhaps it is because I have been concentrating myself too much on one thing, and being mortally sick of that one thing I am in a resentful mood about everything else. That sounds generally stupid, but don't be too critical."

He ended a trifle awkwardly, as if he did not quite know whether this strange girl, who had the forehead and eyes of a child and the brain of the worldly-wise, would not take advantage of him and begin to laugh. But Phyllis had never disappointed him that way, and she was not going to do so now.

"I don't mind it at all," she replied with a gentleness which surprised him. "Why should you not do as you please? It is I who dragged you to this far-away corner. If you choose to sit quiet until the spirit moves you, I shall not mind. Listen to the sounds in the distance; they are very restful."

There was borne to them, like a reflective drone, the murmur of many subdued voices mixed with the music of a string quartette.

"After all," she went on slowly, as if she were musing aloud, "there is a good deal more in that saying—that speech was only given us to hide our thoughts—than most people imagine. So long as one is busy with one's own things—with simple things having to do with the everyday routine of life, with the things one does every day—one is quite natural. But otherwise why should one be natural and confide in every one? I never do; and so if I made you talk now when you don't want to, you would only say things which mean nothing." She dropped her hands on her lap and stared at the opposite wall.

Yet, though she appeared so philosophical, secretly Phyllis wondered what Peter Kerr was thinking about. There had always been something original in their attitude towards each other, and latterly this peculiar quality had been much accentuated. Phyllis was not the ordinary young woman, to be led to the altar of Hymen like a conscript belonging to the yearly draft, and she had always been in her heart of hearts glad that Peter Kerr had not accepted her as such. Yet though she believed this sincerely enough, it had piqued her more than she cared to confess to have had him think it necessary to emphasize in the pointed way he had done the other day that the splendid isolation of bachelordom was very essential to his plans and his happiness. Altogether Phyllis just then would have had some difficulty in explaining her real state of mind in a manner which would command credence; but then that happens to every one in the world very frequently in the course of every twenty-four hours.

"I think you are refreshingly wise," remarked Kerr quite sincerely after a pause, looking her frankly in the eyes, as she turned towards him. "Why is it that women are always so much wiser than men in the small things that mean so much?"

She coloured in spite of herself, seeing, perhaps, in his words something more than appeared on the surface.

"Don't be absurd," she protested. "I am sure, for instance, that your flattery of my sex tickles me as much as it would the silliest woman in the world. I adore flattery; it is the food on which all of us women feed as much as possible, and quite rightly too."

"Ah," sighed Peter Kerr, leaning back pensively, "then I am afraid that I shall not be able to satisfy your hunger much longer. You know I will have to be going away very soon to the very opposite end of the world, where there will be nothing but hard work and no play."

The colour stole back to her cheeks once more: she had been expecting this.

"You are really going soon?" she inquired quickly, in an anxious tone, which she did not trouble to disguise. "How soon?"

Kerr shook his head slowly.

"Who knows?" he replied. "We are waiting for some news, and are meanwhile completing all our preparations. When the news comes and our preparations are finished, I shall have to go within twenty-four hours, so you may not see me again for a long time. And the best of the joke," he concluded moodily, "is, that I, who started the whole thing, am already tired of it from overwork. Now that it has come to the point, I really don't want to exile myself a little bit."

Phyllis did not answer at once. She toyed with a slender gold chain which hung from her neck to her waist, running her fingers quickly up and down it, as if the action soothed and quieted her.

Suddenly—and boldly—she spoke:

"Yet, you must go, you know; you could not possibly draw back now. You will have to go and make a great success of your scheme. Then when you come back crowned with glory, you will be very thankful——"

She did not finish entirely, but sat there with a strangely earnest expression on her young face. Peter Kerr leant forward and looked at her gravely.

"How curious it is," he remarked, "that you should have said that—that you should be wise enough to say it. Of course I must go now whether I like it or not, but still, not many would advise a man that way."

Phyllis breathed a little more quickly.

"Every one would say it," she answered resolutely, looking away and refusing to accept his view. "Those who wouldn't say it would not be worth listening to. That sounds like an Irishism, but it is just plain common sense." She turned her head once more towards him and smiled faintly.

Peter Kerr caught the mist in her eyes.

"Will you be really sorry?" he said suddenly, placing one hand gently on her arm. Involuntarily she drew away a little, as though she feared that in her present mood she would only be weak where she wished to be strong.

"You must not do that," she said in real agitation, as she attempted to shake off his touch. But Peter Kerr had taken her hand, and that gave him fresh confidence.

"Will you be sorry?" he asked again.

"How can I answer questions when you act that way?" she protested once more as he refused to release her.

"Questions really don't need answers when two people understand each other properly," he rejoined smilingly.

"But it is bad to understand too well—sometimes."

"Why?" he asked with tantalizing dullness.

Phyllis shrugged her shoulders. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, her red lips trembled. Was it possible that——

"It's your fault," she said, trying to speak calmly, "if I can't talk with that wisdom which you were belauding only a minute ago."

"Of course it's my fault," rejoined Kerr. "Still, it suits my humour and I like it——"

"A man," began Phyllis, "should never be humoured."

"Oh," murmured Kerr, "what rank heresy! Now I will prove to you the very contrary——"

It is not at all certain what might have not happened had they been left alone one little minute longer; for everything was favourable and Cupid was amused. But, as it happened, the hour had become treacherously late. People had been taking their departure so rapidly that there was hardly any one left save those last few who never seem to go.

Mrs. John West, a little excited and withal somewhat tired with her efforts at entertaining so many, was now able to give a sigh of relief and began looking for Peter Kerr. She looked here, she looked there; where had the man gone to?

Perhaps he was sitting in some quiet corner; so she passed from room to room, her surprise increasing at his elusiveness.

The thick carpeting gave no alarm, and therefore the first thing that made the two aware of this search was to see Mrs. John West standing in front of them, red with annoyance and anger.

"Oh," she exclaimed sarcastically, "I am really very sorry that I have come at such a touching moment. I must go."

Yet she did not move an inch—she seemed glued to the ground.

It is to Peter Kerr's credit that he met a situation of some embarrassment with a good deal of nerve. He got up, and putting his hands carelessly in his pockets, attempted to pass it off lightly. Yet he remarked that the two women observed each other with ill-disguised hostility. Instinctively Phyllis had understood something she had understood before. What, he wondered, did they think of him?

"It was all my fault," he said with a short laugh.

"Dear Phyllis was having her fortune told, I suppose," suggested Mrs. John West. "Was she really born under the planet Venus?"

There was a peculiar intonation in her voice as she addressed them both which carried a subtle meaning.

"Dear Phyllis was not having her fortune told," remarked the girl hotly, as she saw that Peter Kerr remained silent. "And, after all, what she was being told was her own business. Good-afternoon."

And thereupon, in hot displeasure, Phyllis rustled away with such rapidity that the other two were left face to face almost before they had realized what had come.

"Everybody gone?" inquired Kerr with assumed cheerfulness a minute later, as they moved off together—meanwhile thinking hard.

"No," answered Mrs. John West with pointed brevity as she walked towards the big drawing-room.

"Oh!" said Kerr aloud, beginning to realize when it was too late the seriousness of the position. "Damn!" he muttered angrily under his breath. And at the very first opportunity he too made his departure in greater discontent than ever.

Oh, how curiously is the human cobweb spun!

CHAPTER V

"La plupart des hommes emploient la première partie de leur vie à rendre l'autre misérable."
LA BRUYÈRE.

SIR JAMES BARKER represented a rather uncommon type of man. With a capacity for paying great care and attention to detail he combined a large and speculative mind which enjoyed taking risks and saw in difficulties only tests of ability. It was a well-known axiom of his that most disasters, financial as well as others, sprang from and were indeed nothing but the necessary and legitimate offspring of ignorance or carelessness. Had he been a student of history, he would have known that this capacity for paying immense attention to details and leaving nothing to chance was practically the sole reason for the astounding success of the first Napoleon. It was only when the great adventurer became careless that disaster dogged his footsteps.

Sir James Barker admitted, of course, that no matter how much care is exercised there must always remain things which the wisest and most prescient of men cannot possibly provide for; and that consequently it was always possible that the intervention of just such unknown quantities would take away success when it appeared assured. But just because he admitted this, whenever he took any serious matter in hand he sought to inform himself all the more thoroughly from every point of view of all unlikely as well as likely factors in a given problem. That was his strong point—his exceptional gift. Having properly weighed and thought over these various matters, he proceeded to make up his mind inflexibly; and by a policy of persistence and of constant reinsurance—in certain ways which are only known in detail to the higher finance—he gradually developed each

separate scheme so well that hitherto there had not been a single important failure scored against him. In some South American and African ventures, which had been scouted at by all the more important finance houses, he had even managed after a sharp struggle to extract a tolerable profit after the original schemes had been torn to shreds. It was due, indeed, to this quality of persisting where others became discouraged and only anxious, in the market phrase, "to cut their loss," that he owed his exceptional position in private international finance.

With regard to Peter Kerr's great scheme, Sir James Barker was by no means certain in his own mind that success in the ordinary acceptance of the word would come direct to them—that is, that it would be possible for a private corporation to induce the government of China to view matters in the proper light and quickly to take in hand railway construction on a gigantic scale so as to anticipate, and thus frustrate, all other European schemes of encroachment. But after the most careful analysis of the situation from every point of view, he had come to the conclusion that even if they themselves did not complete their scheme, some fragments thereof would mature sooner or later. For somebody would have to build these Chinese railways; and as their building would entail large demands on the world's money-markets, when these demands were made then would come his chance and he would know how to profit by it.

For though very few people realize it properly, the moneyed world is controlled by only a few dozen men, and if any one of these sets his heart on any particular field and works in it persistently, he speedily acquires therein a sort of right of prescription which his fellows are careful not to contest. Sir James Barker knew, therefore, that it would be easy to meet subsequent developments in the Far East in such a way as to insure that any money he sunk in Kerr's scheme would come back to him if he carefully studied all rival plans and made his dispositions accordingly. It was merely a question of market cunning for him to know

when and where to act so as to participate in all Chinese issues. Real success is for those who sit in the centre of the web, however much the contrary may appear from time to time to be the case. For those sitting in the centre are the spiders—and all the others mere flies—and this Sir James Barker well knew.

The big banker, however, had been careful not to discuss things in such a way with Peter Kerr as to allow his enthusiasm to cool; for Sir James Barker was something of a student of men, and ample experience had proved to him that the philosophic state of mind is the very worst one for a promoter to possess. A promoter of big schemes, like the Dervish fanatic, must be an uncompromising enthusiast. He must do or die; he must have no idea of defeat or retreat—that, at least, was Sir James Barker's conception. It was reserved for the men behind a scheme, he held, to reconsider matters should such reconsideration become imperative; but no inkling of this should ever be allowed to pass to those on whom the brunt of the battle must necessarily fall. It will be observed that between Sir James Barker and Peter Kerr there was a considerable difference not only of temperament but also of ideas. The older man understood the variables as well as the constants of success; the younger man had not yet sufficiently grasped that somewhat extraordinary fact that what may be mathematically true is not necessarily true, and that the wise man is he who has no fixed ideas. Therefore, whilst Peter Kerr believed that everything rested on his shoulders, and that the others must stand or fall with him, Sir James Barker knew that the very reverse might prove to be the case. Peter Kerr and his scheme was an experiment to the big banker and nothing else—for Barker was a wise man, and was never carried away by a fixed idea.

Though some time had now elapsed since the first official meeting at the bank, to all inquiries from his colleagues as to why Peter Kerr did not start at once, Barker had returned

evasive answers. As a matter of fact he was waiting for certain advices from the Continent before settling several important points in his future policy; he wished to be quite certain that the developments apparently coming in from the Far East would not be suddenly arrested by extraneous influences. He relied on either Paris or Brussels to give him the needed information, and because he was persistent in his inquiries he was not disappointed.

On the very afternoon that Peter Kerr was being so tantalized in so many different ways the banker received his long-expected telegraphic information. Paris and Brussels—both far better informed regarding the secrets of all European chancelleries than London ever can be—informed him that it was practically certain that the China policies of the various Cabinets had been definitely settled, and that various new diplomatic agreements with China would soon be signed, giving an aspect of permanence to the tentative moves which had been made some weeks before. He was told that he could rely absolutely on the information given, though it was still a closely-guarded diplomatic secret.

Sir James Barker lost no time. Failing to find Peter Kerr anywhere in the afternoon by messenger, he drove himself to Kerr's flat at half-past seven o'clock. Kerr not having returned, the banker took off his coat and installed himself in an armchair. He would wait, no matter how long it might be, for he considered the matter of great importance.

His persistence was very speedily rewarded, for Peter Kerr had walked direct from Mrs. John West's, and was only a few hundred yards away when Sir James Barker had entered his rooms. At once he hurried up to him before taking off his coat.

"What is it?" he inquired anxiously, half knowing what it must be.

"The time has come," said Barker, showing him what he had received. "The time has come; you will have to start at once."

Kerr read hurriedly through the papers he was handed.

"Yes," he replied shortly, as soon as he had digested their contents, "I will have to start at once. Let me see."

He went to a writing-desk.

"There is a boat leaving Marseilles in three days," he read aloud from a paper; "I can just catch it."

Barker nodded to him and watched him thoughtfully.

"Come round to the bank to say good-bye to-morrow morning," he said. "It is now or never, for I think things will move quickly."

"Yes," replied Kerr.

They separated after very few words more, for they were both very thoughtful.

"That chapter is over," said Kerr to himself as soon as Barker had gone, thinking of his afternoon. "That chapter is over," he repeated morosely. But that was audacious of him, for little did he imagine how it would be reopened.

For no sooner had Mrs. John West been left alone than she had swept down on her writing-table and hurriedly commenced to write. She had a good deal to say, since that afternoon she had heard much about Peter Kerr's venture; and at last she had made up her mind how she would act. As she wrote her bosom heaved and her hands trembled. "He does not know what a fool he has been," she exclaimed to herself again and again in her excitement. For her vanity had been deeply wounded, and now nothing would salve it but reprisals.

Early next morning Colonel Maes read her letter in his hotel with open delight. "At last things begin to move," he muttered as he paced quickly up and down his room. "I shall really be able to learn all I wish about these amusing English," and forthwith he too prepared for action.

Of all these galvanized people Phyllis alone did not know what to do. Though she was ignorant of much that was going on, she felt that she had made a crucial mistake that afternoon. She should have warned Peter Kerr; she should

have told him her suspicions. She was more convinced than ever that behind Mrs. John West's peculiar attitude lay some peculiar incentive. Yet now it was too late to say so—the psychological moment had plainly passed. For if she spoke Peter Kerr would conclude that jealousy was her motive, that she desired a womanly revenge. Whereas the simple truth was——

As she sat there alone she coloured with emotion. No—after the way he had let things end, not even to herself would she confess what that simple truth might be.

In such foolish ways are momentous decisions in this world arrived at.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

"L'univers est une espèce de livre, dont on n'a lu que la première page quand on n'a vu que son pays."—FOUGERET DE MONBRON, *Le Cosmopolite.*

PETER KERR pushed his sun-helmet back and gave vent to a long sigh of relief. The train was undoubtedly slackening its speed. It was doing so a little rebelliously, almost as if it feared to lose the hot breeze it made as it rushed along over the lifeless, sunburnt plains; but still it was slackening its speed, and that meant that this long, this interminable afternoon was coming to an end. So Peter Kerr sighed with relief, and even looked with renewed interest at the landscape around him.

There was, however, not much to see different in any way from that which he had been watching for the past four or five hours. Mostly there were vast, interminable fields, covered with a fast-sprouting crop which seemed turned almost brown in the dull red sunlight, when it should have been only green with the joyousness of spring. Through these fields crept at irregular intervals, as if they were intruders with no real *locus standi,* narrow sinuous cart-roads, rutted very deep and looking brown, brown, brown. This indeed was the prevailing colour, the essential key-note. The very air was full of brownness and powdered dust; its essence seemed to fill heaven and earth. Lines of clumsy country carts, drawn by big, lolloping teams of mules and ponies, sometimes made their way out of a village, and behind them they too left great powder-puffs of dust floating in the still air, as if to proclaim once more the strange quality of the soil.

The villages themselves were different from any villages Peter Kerr had ever seen before; they were mud-coloured

villages, made of mud and crouching near the surface of the soil in ugly, straggling formations. They had no symmetry about them; they seemed to have risen from the ground owing to some convulsion of nature. That, however, was only the first impression. Soon they appeared to the eye as they should be; they were the natural outcome of the environment; they fitted in with their surroundings. And when one looked at them long and tried to understand them properly, for all their appearance of shiftlessness they became invested with a certain peculiar loose-jointed strength and innate virility of their own. They were like the man who had built them—a man who easily survives all the vicissitudes which the world contains in its many regions, in spite of his unresisting aspect. Irresolute, wandering groves of trees were distributed round these villages, as if their action was merely tentative and subject to sudden reconsideration. At any moment they might be felled for showing an impertinent individuality of their own, an individuality distinctly at variance with the earth-hugging—the flattened—characteristic of everything else.

For the trees were already green, if nothing else was. Sometimes they were quite aggressively green, and were marshalled very close together, as if to show that they dominated and were the true masters of some big square piece of soil which was surrounded by a low wall of grey brick. This was a burial-ground—a place of family graves. The green, therefore, was emblematic not of the living but of the never-forgotten dead in an ancestor-worshipping country; the green had just now nothing very much to do with the living. Even the little red-walled country temples had no such distinction as these green-clad family burial-places; their broad courtyards were almost destitute of trees. It was reserved for the graveyards to be distinguished by their evergreenness.

Over this vast landscape, which in the wonderful sunlight slowly took on a pensive, wistful beauty of its own, men, women, and children, in an unending monotone of blue cloth-

ing, were distributed in unexpected places. Sometimes they were squatting together half hidden under some high bank, patiently munching food out of big bowls or gourds; sometimes they suddenly ran out from a sunken road and as suddenly stopped to stare in unblinking surprise at the onrushing, whistling train. It was a very new world this, thought Peter Kerr, leaning his face on his hands. It was vast, untamed. It was a world of millions of people scratching the soil so as to drag therefrom a bare sustenance—a world of people surely separated from him and his ideas by gulfs which he could not even imagine.

Whilst he looked, steadily the train was slackening its speed, whistling more and more persistently, as if its movements had for some reason become a matter of vital importance to all within possible sight or hearing. Peter Kerr could now feel the brakes being applied; the wheels were adding their screaming protests to the general din created by the impending stoppage. The figures on the highways and byways became clearer and more frequent; many heavily-laden carts were now halted on the dusty streaks of roadway, waiting for this insistent, masterful thing, which arrogated to itself a special roadway, to pass along. The stage had become so small, because of the lesser speed, that one could now observe every detail. The teams of mixed draft-animals, shouted at and chided unceasingly by the bronzed drivers as the train slid past, stood to attention curiously taut, as if they were tight-strung to their rope-traces and nothing could break their rigidity. Their staring eyes and their high-standing ears showed the great fear which had come over them. Without their drivers' voices they would count themselves lost souls. They would break away—they would jump—they would kick—every madness would possess them. It was rather unique, thought Peter Kerr, as his window-pane played the part of a kaleidoscope.

"PEKING!"

A voice shouting this suddenly awoke him with a start to what he had obviously known for many minutes. He

reflected for a moment how it is always like that at the end of a long voyage—how the obvious is surprising and even distressful. Then with a thump he let the wire-gauze window down and thrust out his head.

Peking—where was it?

Immediately ahead, as far as he could see, there was nothing but larger collections of these low-lying mud buildings with which the last few hours had made him familiar. They were now adorned, however, with great black characters painted on a whitewashed ground; that meant warehouses for goods—*godowns,* as they were called, he thought. It was obviously the end of the line, but where was this Peking?

The train swerved heavily as it took a vast curve, and there, suddenly disclosed to his eyes, was a grey, crenellated city wall with little towers crowning it at regular intervals. He had an involuntary feeling of disappointment. Though it was a couple of miles off, it did not seem as imposing as he had been led to believe. A little irritably, he turned to a fellow-traveller who seemed to know everything.

"Is that Peking?" he asked, embracing with a wave of his hand the distant wall-line.

"Yes and no," answered his companion. "It is only the Outer city—the so-called Chinese city. Inside of that, or rather joined on to it, is the Tartar city—the real Peking of the Tartars. Just now there is nothing to see. You will have to ride in before you can understand it."

Peter Kerr relapsed into silence and busied himself closing his bags. He remembered that railways in this land had been hated and forbidden things. So this one—almost the only railway in the country—only approached as near as it dared to the capital. This was the explanation: he remembered having heard it already.

Slowly, very slowly, the train lumbered to the begrudged standstill. It appeared unconquerable! It creaked, it groaned, and yet it lumbered on. Shouting, jostling crowds of blue-clad, brown-faced men grew up alongside many seconds before it had completely stopped, and began accompany-

ing the carriages at a run. There was no platform at all, and the station, save for a solitary half-completed building, was simply a vast open space lined with sidings and littered with all manner of things. Numbers of these blue-clad, brown-faced men pulled after them into the jostling throng donkeys and ponies which viewed with contemptuous indifference the bustle round them. Other men, armed with little white flags which were adorned with a few square characters, contented themselves with waving and gesticulating frantically to the masses of native travellers who would soon alight. These were inn-keepers' touts sent to secure custom. Drawn up in regular lines some distance away were endless numbers of the famous Peking carts with their rigid blue-cloth hoods and their massive nail-studded wheels. Barking dogs added to all this confusion; and here, there, and everywhere appeared men selling cakes, men selling fruit, men selling sweets, as well as men selling steaming hot food, which they doled out of little portable kitchens slung on poles. No wonder the train had whistled so much. A whole population awaited its arrival.

The final pull-up came so sharply that Peter Kerr was flung forward on to a seat; and as he picked up his fallen sun-helmet he heard the babel of voices rise suddenly like a tidal-wave and sweep on to the train, inundating everything and completely drowning every other sound. This virile, reeking, shouting mob was boarding the train; it was time to stand by and repel boarders.

Instinctively he gripped his traps and stood ready. Unseen hands were twisting back every door; men wrestled frantically in sweaty groups, and because of the jam they made none could get forward. These sounds of battle increased every second. The touts and runners, who infest every stopping-place in China and openly fight over the bodies of their victims, were at work. Even in the Hongkong harbour, with smart police launches on duty, hundreds of sampans manage to surround every incoming vessel as fish do a piece of food, and before anchor has been cast dozens of men will

swarm on board by means of long boat-hooks up which they clamber with the agility of monkeys. Casting these back into the sea, as soon as their grip is secure, they fall on native travellers' luggage with their inn labels, and secure custom by brute force. That is surely business with a vengeance.

Though he was prepared for every emergency, though he had already seen these things, Peter Kerr certainly did not expect the dénouement which now came. For suddenly the door nearest him was flung open by a firm hand, and there appeared an immensely fat Chinaman, crowned with a big, discoloured Terai hat. His other chief features were a great silver watch-chain slung across his chest, a broad flannel cholera-belt worn outside his waistcoat, and a serviceable cane. He was wonderful.

The fat man grinned all over as he clumsily removed his headgear and bowed in a deferential way. Then, before he had spoken, he turned with startling rapidity and hurled his great weight against the entrance just in time to crush back a confused mass of men who were pushing forward. Still not uttering a word, as these poor devils fell back snarling and cursing, he shut the door on them and applied his weight to keep it securely shut. Peter Kerr burst out laughing. These tactics were eminently practical.

"Dam fool!" commented the fat man pithily, jerking a hand over his shoulder. Then, remaining as he was, very carefully he sought within the pocket of his short coat and drew therefrom a much wrinkled and somewhat dirty piece of paper.

"Mister Kerr?" he inquired in the same jerky manner, spacing out his syllables after the Oriental way. "All right —very good. Your telegram duly received. Hotel have send ponies." His language was like his attire; it was an odd mixture of two conflicting civilizations.

Still keeping his massive back against the door, he inspected the luggage; and having quickly made up his mind, he suddenly stepped nimbly aside and let three or four men tumble

through the door, only to pinion back the rest while the bags were gathered up.

"Hao-la," he called to the coolies as they stood with the things strapped to their shoulders. *"Hao-la,"* they called back; and mentioning to Peter Kerr to stand aside, at last he let go his hold completely and allowed the devastating mob to sweep through the carriage. Having thus scientifically attended to things with the least possible fuss, he led the way out.

"You're a great man," remarked Peter Kerr with a laugh of approval as he waited for the next step. He was almost sure he would like this people. This person, for instance, was worthy of praise. He had no use for the superfluous; he went straight to the point.

But the fat man was not heeding him. With a methodical attention to business which was somewhat admirable, he was now engaged in settling a little affair which had apparently been allowed to hang over until the more pressing matter of landing his charge from the train had been attended to. With one brawny arm round a lean coolie's neck, he was threatening to belabour his compatriot with his cane if he did not do something. For a while the coolie remained stolidly obdurate, though his head was in chancery and his neck was being wrung; then deciding with the curious philosophy of his race that the game was up, he dropped on his knees and bobbed up and down in open contrition. The fat man immediately let go, and grinned round satisfied at Peter Kerr.

"Dam fool, squeezing me," he pithily explained once more, with another waggish jerk of his head. Peter Kerr had thought the squeezing was all on the other side. But the fat man opened his hand and showed a silver ten-cent piece he had thus neatly recovered; the squeeze was purely metaphorical. Manifestly, if things began like this, here was obviously a country of many possibilities. There was constant action, and people acted with admirable simplicity.

Peter Kerr, amused and smiling, followed his guide through the sweating, shouting throng to the serried lines of blue-

hooded Peking carts. Native travellers, now literally dragged along by insistent touts who never ceased disputing and arguing with one another, were being thrust, together with their impedimenta, into these conveyances. These travellers uttered cries which sounded to a stranger's ears like piteous protests at such unceremonious treatment. Yet they were nothing of the kind. In reality they were only vociferous attempts to beat down prices before a surrender was made to the inevitable fate of being driven to inns where every mother's son would carefully and cunningly combine to extract money to the uttermost farthing. It was a battle in which victory remained with the strongest lungs. As a first experience it might be termed amazing.

The fat man, being of the land, was entirely indifferent to all such things. If there was a noise, he did not know it. If he was beaten aside by a great press of people, he merely threw his weight against the crowd and readjusted the balance. Like a football player he humped his way towards the goal—which in this case was a shaggy, stumpy pony held by a very little boy. The very little boy had bare feet and legs and black twinkling eyes and was engaged in open warfare with another small person who was circling round his Rosinante and slily digging him in the ribs with a piece of bamboo to make him kick. This comedy ceased magically with the appearance of the fat man, who was evidently feared. Peter Kerr was drinking it all greedily in and lingered a little behind. The scene and the excitement appealed to him in many ways. He had never seen anything like it before. It was more like a play than real life; there appeared endless dramatic possibilities.

A donkeyman, seeing him stop, rapidly urged his little beast towards him with those curious guttural cries and clicks of the tongue which form the Chinese language of animals. As soon as he had reached him, seizing him in an oddly friendly way by the arm, the donkeyman tried to persuade him to mount the little beast's red pack. Peter Kerr smilingly pointed to his pony; but the Chinaman was not to be denied.

Like a cunning salesman knowing how best to advertise his wares, suddenly he jumped on the donkey himself, rode him rapidly round in a circle to show his paces, and then brought him to a standstill as if a Westinghouse brake had been applied. The little animal was all sinews and muscles; who could be hard-hearted enough to refuse him?

But Peter Kerr had to refuse, and intimated this by making his way up to the pony. Thereupon the donkeyman, as if it had been all a play, suddenly relaxed his efforts, and leaning his elbows on his donkey's pack grinned most affably. He said as clearly as if he had spoken, "It really does not matter."

"You are certainly all good-natured," remarked Kerr to the fat man as he mounted the pony; and the fat man, though perhaps he did not understand, grinned too. Peter Kerr had not known that they would all laugh so easily; real good humour is generally associated only with negroes, whereas all Asia is full of good-humoured and easy-going people who do not worry much.

But suddenly the fat man exchanged his grin for a troubled look. His round moon face became surcharged with strange perplexity, and he scratched himself with inelegant vigour.

"Only one pony," he said finally, as if that obvious fact had only just dawned upon him. "I take luggage, must wait. You find way?"

"No," replied Peter Kerr, "I probably won't. I shall get lost."

"Oh!" said the fat man reflectively, as a white man would have done. Then he suddenly swung on the donkeyman who had been so attentive, and poured forth on him a torrent of words. Instantly the donkeyman called *"hao-la,"* as the luggage coolies had done, and leapt like a clown on to his pack.

"Lai, lai," he called encouragingly to Peter Kerr. He whacked his willing little beast and beckoned violently at one and the same time.

"All right, no fear," echoed the fat man reassuringly. "He

take you. No fear," and with this last reflection he left Peter Kerr to follow the man as best he could.

The shouts and chirrups of the donkeyman, engaged joyously in clearing the way for this unexpected profit-taking, left a trail of sound behind which was sufficient to guide Peter Kerr after him through the thick crowd at a fast trot; and presently, leaving the neighbourhood of the camp-like station, they were pounding along one of those strange rutted highways belonging by direct descent to the middle ages, and which had been so constantly visible from the train. Carts, mules, donkeys, and ponies—all were now moving forward in the same direction at the same steady amble, and soon Peter Kerr was powdered from head to foot with fine grey dust. There were unending lines of these conveyances and animals; it was exactly like the baggage-train of an army moving swiftly in retreat. Sometimes this dust became so thick that Peter Kerr could only just see ahead of him the dim outline of the donkeyman seated on his fast-stepping little beast. Yet the donkeyman, all arms and legs, as he drove at topmost speed, minded this inconvenience so little that he shouted and grunted encouragement the whole time; and thus, in spite of the incongruity of the pair and the dissimilarity of their mounts, their rate of travelling accorded exactly. The donkeyman, thought Peter Kerr, was a fit Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote, and as he felt the weedy mount between his knees, he was sure that Rosinante had not died childless. Perhaps, also he thought, like the hero of the Spanish Chronicler, he might be proceeding to the conquest of the impossible. Who knew—who could say? And amid these reflections, pressing along quickly, the city wall soon grew up alongside almost unobserved. They had arrived at the Outer city.

Suddenly ahead a big block was apparent. For some reason carts, mules, ponies, and donkeys, all racing into the walled city through this maelstrom of dust, had been halted with a jerk; and now everybody was peering ahead and cursing the delay. What had caused the block was not immediately

apparent; but presently a distant clang of curious, hollow-sounding bells, possessing a deep yet tin-like note, began and steadily came nearer and nearer, the volume of sound constantly increasing.

"Lo-to, Lo-to."

Peter Kerr, with his ears attuned to catch the strange new sounds of a strange land, heard every one exclaim these words discontentedly. He wondered what they meant. He was not enlightened until he saw, moving majestically down on him, unending lines of shadowy forms, looking immense in the dust, with the slow bell-clanging marking their rhythmic progress. They were camels—certainly hundreds of camels, if not thousands of camels. A great caravan was passing out of the city, bound for the passes which lead through the mountains and the Great Wall of China to Mongolia, and thence on to China's most distant dominions, called variously Zungaria, Eastern Turkestan, or the New Dominion. Peter Kerr had read of this. Now that he was face to face for the first time with these strange beasts of burden, which can carry such small weights, and yet are the cheapest and only method of transportation in a waterless and foodless country, he eagerly watched.

Each driver, with a blue cloth tied round his head, and walking with the rolling awkward walk of the camels themselves, led six or seven beasts behind him exactly as a locomotive hauls a train; each of the six or seven animals—seven being the driver's proper number—was tied by a stout nose-string to the one in front of it, the last camel having the rude, clanking iron bell swung round its neck. On each animal was the same load—two small chests of perhaps eighty pounds' weight each, which were slung between the double hump on a rude pack-saddle. The camel-drivers, rough fellows burnt a deep copper colour from constant exposure to the elements, seemed to be sauntering along as if they were strolling to nowhere in particular, for pack-camels only travel two miles an hour and cannot be hurried. Yet perhaps this caravan was plodding away on a long journey

which would end only somewhere in the middle of Asia. Here was a romantic and barbaric flavour at the very city gates.

It was many minutes before the musical bell-clanging and the solemn and stately march passed away. Then, as Peter Kerr finally followed his guide over the stoneway leading through the first gate, he had a constant struggle to prevent his low-stepping pony from coming down. The stone flags, worn and rounded and polished by the endless traffic, were as slippery as glass. And in addition, between the stone flags were deep holes literally dug out by the grind of ten million cart-wheels in ages past—holes capable of flinging down the unwary with a cruel fall, since it was impossible to see them until too late. In the crush and dust and clamour—for the archway was filled with a roar of sound—Peter Kerr blessed the good luck which carried him through without mishap. It was not a question of riding; it was far more like piloting a ship through dangerous submerged reefs.

Once inside the gate, however, these dangers ceased, and the city opened up in front of him with a vista of bounteous amplitude. From this outer gateway, straight as a ruled line, ran the broad stoneway leading to the still more important Central Gate of the Inner or Tartar city. On this ruled line rumbled and bumped a seething tide of traffic. To the right and left, however, were great empty spaces full of extraordinary hollows and ugly mounds made by the ravages of time—empty spaces which only ended in two immense enclosures shut in by heavy walls against which sand-hills had piled themselves. The one on the eastern side was the far-famed Temple of Heaven; on the western side was the less celebrated but equally spacious Temple of Agriculture. Both were vast enclosures worthy of Asiatic Cæsars. From this distant central stoneway, at first only the glinting green-tiled roofs and the red-painted entrances were visible to Peter Kerr, together with an uncertain view of green tree-tops, marking the stately avenues which lead

through these noble, secluded grounds. But when a little carved marble bridge is reached, over which no one but the Emperor may pass, and round which eddies in two broken streams the endless traffic of the workaday world—when this marble bridge is reached, it is possible to see rising high above the surrounding walls the cerulean blue roof of the famed drum-shaped belvedere which crowns the sacred precincts of the Altars of Heaven, and to catch glimpses of other richly painted halls and pavilions.

Peter Kerr, ambling along through the dust and dirt on his shaggy mount, was quickly struck with the magnificence of the conception of these two temples, to which are sacrificed so many square miles of space within the limits of the Outer city. They were so dignified, so sedate, so removed from the trivialities of the modern world, that to bestow adjectives on them seemed to him like painting the lily. Nothing could spoil their peculiar beauty; nothing could equal their matchless setting. They were still what they were originally intended to be—truly divine. In those early days of a decade ago, it was still possible for the railway traveller, deposited so unceremoniously miles beyond the gates, by entering the great capital in the same way as did the very travellers of the days of Marco Polo, to pick up point by point the princely Tartar-Chinese idea of Imperial Power and to admire the manner in which everything else was made subordinate to it. This indeed was the city of the emperors of the most populous empire in the world; it stood unique and alone; it was celebrated even in the days of the Persian story-tellers, for was it not the city of Aladdin and his wonderful Lamp? Even though dirt and dilapidation now struck discordant notes, those notes were quickly forgotten. They did not really matter; they were inevitable if the past were to be preserved—if endless centuries were to greet one in their proper barbaric manner. Here heaven and earth were ranged opposite to one another, as if to show that the eternal spiritual and the workaday world were only divided by the narrowest boundaries which the Emperor in his sup-

plications could easily bridge. The way in which everything was here ordered was unique. It was audaciously bold but severely orderly. It was highly imaginative yet eminently practical. It was therefore somewhat different from anything in any other part of the world.

Peter Kerr passed as in a dream round the marble bridge, which crosses no waterway but has merely been built above the roadway so as properly to mark, in a way which every Asiatic at once understands, the path of imperial progress from the palaces within the Forbidden City to these august temples.

Now new sights greeted him.

For, once beyond the marble bridge, the great main street of the outer trading city suddenly begins, duly heralded by clumps of rude blue tents which have invaded the open space and in which cheap Jacks display their varied stocks. On either side of the wide roadway there were now ranged gaudily-painted shops and warehouses of every possible design and colouring. Greens and golds and blues and reds seemed mixed in the crudest way, yet somehow harmonized wonderfully with their surroundings, being thrown into the sharpest relief by the grey-brown soil and the blue-clad people. Not only were these shop-fronts distinctly different from one another—some being of one design and some of another, some made in one colour-scheme and some in another—but many were set off to still greater advantage by the introduction of fantastic painted poles which looked like Venetian masts and towered high above the low roofs. There were also curious sign-boards—a particular product of this northern clime—made of a single thick plank often thirty feet long, locked to the ground between massive stone supports and rising perpendicularly so that the great painted characters could be clearly read many dozens of yards away by every eye.

The dust-clouds, which had almost disappeared along the stoneway, now rose in Peter Kerr's nostrils more chokingly than ever and even half obscured his view. It was enough

to be suffocated, he thought, without being blinded. Yet all these moving crowds of horsemen and pedestrians, and the still denser lines of carts filled with occupants and clattering quickly one after the other, seemed curiously indifferent to an inconvenience which must set the stranger sneezing and coughing in an ecstacy of discomfort. The traffic moved on impassively in unbroken streams. The springless carts rumbled and thumped; the ponies and mules whinnied and snorted; the people talked and laughed. The dust—nobody noticed it! It was a strangely new and rough world, a world apparently living in peace and contentment in perpetual dust which was only reduced to muddy subjection during the torrential summer rainy season—a strong, hoarse-throated world reeking of the camp. Peter Kerr, seeking for the right word as he looked around, at last found it. It was an encampment, that was what it was—an encampment built for Tartar conquerors and for no one else. The camp-lines were forever perpetuated in the stiff military fortifications of the double city, in the straight, ruler-like streets, in the canals, in the moats, in the watch-towers. Perhaps now it was only a city of refuge for a dynasty in distress because of the white-skinned foreigner who was menacing the whole coast-line and the land-frontiers as well: but historically it was a conqueror's encampment, the headquarters of a great military system. That was plain, very plain.

For above the low-lying shops could be seen line upon line of hills and mountains, frowning away towards the west and the northwest and the far north. The setting sun, now sunk behind them, threw them forward as a new key-note to the situation. These mountains and hills masked and concealed those boundless steppes in which had arisen, age after age, the races of quick-moving conquerors who from those distant times when the defence of the Great Wall of China had finally broken down, had cascaded into the empire and imposed their rule on a nation of cultivators and traders. Never was a thousand years of history plainer than on enter-

ing this city of Peking. Peking and the mountains within its view contained almost all that history.

As Kerr and his guide made their way rapidly forward, the press now became ever greater. Side streets were emptying their tributary streams of men and carts and animals into this great central stream which flowed with such mathematical straightness towards the great Central Gate of the Inner city. The din and the close packing of the traffic became more and more marked, and more than once Peter Kerr's legs were menaced with summary amputation as carters purposely drove their heavy wheels into his pony in order to push him aside.

Every moment something new caught his attention. Now there were lines of hoarse-throated traders standing in front of their shops and breaking into louder and louder volleys of cries as they advertised their wares and sought to claim the attention of passers-by. Mostly these traders were big, heavy, bronzed men, more fit physically for the work of Turkish porters than for such shop-crying. On their counters was displayed every kind of thing—the street was a veritable bazaar, glinting with colour. At the back of such shops, seated on benches, were grave signiors, smoking long pipes in solemn conclave, apparently as far removed from the animation in the foreground as if they had belonged to another world. Yet these were the shop-masters, listening to and watching their men and ready to abate just a little more "the last price less than which does nowhere exist." To Peter Kerr it appeared as if he were among the innumerable multitudes of Vanity Fair. There were jugglers, and apes, and shops, and puppet-shows, with their crowds of buyers and sellers and loungers, jabbering in all the dialects of the empire; and if there were no French Row and Spanish Row, at least the towers of the distant city had appeared in the distance exactly as they had to the traveller in "Pilgrim's Progress."

The donkeyman, afraid in the growing dusk that his charge

would not be able to follow him, now suddenly reduced his speed; and with a number of strange cries brought his little animal alongside the pony much as a tug-boat captain manœuvres under the lea of an ocean-liner.

"Man-man-ti," he said with a broad grin, showing what he meant by hauling on his own bridle and making the hard-mouthed donkey walk. *"Man-man-ti,"* he repeated.

"I see, old fellow," replied Peter Kerr. "You mean slow up so as to keep together." He reined in too, and at once the donkeyman gave utterance to the *"hao-hao"* of appreciation which Peter Kerr had already assimilated. He was beginning to be convinced that it should not be hard to get along with this practical people.

It was as well for them to go slow, for the great towers of the Central Gate of the Tartar city—the celebrated Ch'ien Men—now loomed up very near, and towards this entrance half the town seemed that evening to be journeying. Every one was hurrying along at the fast jog-trot of the cart-mules; it seemed almost as if a race for the Inner city was taking place. Mixed in the ordinary town traffic were dust-covered cavalcades which had plainly come from very far away; and as they passed under a decorative Memorial Arch, made of massive timbers coloured vermilion red, a glimpse was had of fresh multitudes crowding from various cross-roads towards the Inner city. These, on closer scrutiny, proved to be mainly strings of pack-animals, and lines of camels bearing coal or up-country merchandise, which had entered the Outer city by the flanking gates of the west and east and had then come along the sandy stretches lying immediately under the Tartar Wall. The clanging of the camel bells and the anxious shouts of the drivers seeking to keep their teams together, now added new and distinct notes to the general noise. It was as if all were madly hastening to lay tribute at the feet of the Emperor. As the hour for the closing of the gates was now so close, from the Inner city there issued rival streams of people mostly going towards the pleasure-quarter of the capital, a quarter rigorously con-

fined to the commercial or Chinese town, and which resounds at night with the subdued hum of discreet debauch.

These new streams were composed of quite different people, and in the fast-falling night they appeared almost unreal. Forcing their way through the dust-laden crowds of city plebeians, camel caravans, and horsemen, and all this other rough-and-tumble working world, now came beautifully clean Peking carts, hooded in rich blue and red cloth and lined with pale silks, in which were seated both men and women, dressed in striking colours. In the now constant halts—when all this heterogeneous crowd stood jammed in an apparently hopeless block of shouting, cursing men and restive animals—Peter Kerr found himself sometimes immediately alongside some of these conveyances of the idle rich of the dominant Manchu caste. It seemed to him like a Far Eastern rival of the days of Beau Brummel and the dandies. The women, with their gorgeous Manchu head-dresses, their painted faces, their silk robes and their embroidered satin waistcoats, each colour more audacious than the next, yet all blending in carefully studied effects, gazed as inquisitively at the Englishman from over their painted fans as the Englishman gazed at them, though indeed they pretended to look away. Sometimes in the same cart were two or even three women sitting cross-legged one behind the other; whilst numbers of retainers, some riding and some on foot, accompanied and kept guard over them. Close behind every such aristocratic conveyance was inevitably an old duenna or two in a common cart. The duty of these cross-faced, wizened old creatures was to stay ever near their mistresses as long as they were abroad, and thus to save them from falling into temptation. The young bloods of the city, many as brightly dressed as the women themselves, instead of placing themselves back in the body of their carts, as did the women, sat cross-legged almost on the shafts, from which coign of vantage they were both relieved from the rough jolting of their springless vehicles and were able to ogle the beauties. And thus in the middle of two conflicting and unending streams

—composed of the gay world coming out and meeting the workaday and travel-stained world and blending with it—the donkeyman led Peter Kerr slowly to his destination.

At length they reached the great mediæval gates, with their mighty ramparts crowned by the curious and historic towers, in each of which there is room for scores of archers, and on which are painted black cannons' mouths to frighten the enemy. Peter Kerr found that the Outer city entrance was a mere bagatelle compared with this one. He passed through the dark tunnel of an archway which pierced the fifty-foot wall, full of wonderment, only to find himself in an immense semicircular keep where a regiment of infantry could have bivouacked without incommoding the traffic. No wonder Marco Polo was surprised when he had arrived here seven centuries before; no wonder nearly all Asia had once bowed down to the Son of Heaven who was master of all this. Never in olden days had there been anything devised on such a scale. The walled cities of history became trivial things. In this great open well between the double gates the camels squealed and grunted; the mules and ponies whinnied discordantly; men cursed and called; for the stream fought its way from a standstill into motion again only to find itself once again locked to a halt by some new crush. It had become slippery again, too, for once more stone flags marked the way; and above the rattle and the clank of the heavy cart-wheels could now be heard the endless ringing of iron-shod hoofs which struck and struggled to find a firm foothold.

Onwards once more, and then one more tunnel-like archway, above which was yet another mightier painted wooden *lou* or tower; and at last, issuing from the gloom of this narrow passage, Peter Kerr saw in front of him, shut off by a white stone paling, a great silent courtyard, and then beyond that, low-lying but massive pink walls with tight-shut gates. He needed no one to tell him what it was. This was the Forbidden City, in which dwelt the heir to all this Imperial Power—and his mother, the masterful Empress Dowager. A few guards in soldier's dress, but armed only

with short staves, stood lazily in the middle distance. Otherwise there was nothing to denote the might with which superstition and the veneration of ages invested this hallowed spot. It was the culminating stroke, thought Peter Kerr—to have this imperial sanctuary the first thing to strike the eye as one entered the Tartar city. There it was, infinitely impressive because it stood sealed and silent though in full view. He would have gladly lingered and gazed for a little while longer.

But the donkeyman was anxious to get on so that he might return home before it became quite dark. So, touching Peter Kerr's knee, he quickly went ahead once more, and forced his way to a narrow lane which dived into the clusters of ugly low-standing houses almost fringing the outer courtyard of the Forbidden City. Miserable half-naked beggars, lying in wait for likely benefactors, now suddenly rushed whiningly at Peter Kerr's pony, seeking in chorus to make him throw money at them. He waved them aside and hurried on, sniffing the curious new odours and the sudden stenches of the narrow lane with an unappreciative nose. Mechanically he followed the donkeyman out of one lane and into another, always called on by the donkey's tinkling bells. Then suddenly they reached a broader street lighted by some kerosene lamps. The donkeyman, in a last canter, dived across the intervening space and came to a well-lighted doorway. There he dropped to the ground and pointed vigorously through the doorway with an excess of gesture. This was evidently the hotel.

CHAPTER II

"A vaincre sans péril, on triomphe sans gloire."
CORNEILLE, *Le Cid.*

KERR dismounted slowly, after he had watched with some curiosity the donkeyman disappear mysteriously through the massive gateway into a dark courtyard. He was a bit stiff from this jerky ride which had followed his long spell in a railway carriage, and he was not sorry to stand quiet for a few minutes. Yet mentally, in spite of his bodily fatigue, he felt extraordinary exhilaration. The hundred miles of steel rails leading from the seaboard to the metropolitan railway terminus had been a slow education to him in the great possibilities of this strangely new yet strangely old country; his progress through the capital itself had suddenly explained to him by a rough and rapid illustration in men and things much that had previously puzzled him in books or spoken explanations. Indeed, during the last six hours he flattered himself he had really learnt more than in his six months of reading. Here was the land of his dreams—a land of millions and even hundreds of millions of people—a vast, endless land, all tilled and furrowed from end to end, and yet unprovided with any of those inventions which were now so necessary. Harness these millions to the inventions—that was all that was needed! Could it ever be done, and who would do it?

Mechanically his brain began fitting together anew pieces of his own scheming which had previously been something of misfits. He understood at once the advantages and disadvantages of the various steps he had either already taken or had mapped out in advance. He admitted to himself that the vastness of the whole question, considered from a purely practical point of view, had not been fully understood by

him. Yet now that he was on the actual battle-ground of his hopes and fears, the last trace of his indecision left him. At least he was beginning to understand. The brooding hours he had spent on board the mail-ship which had so slowly crawled from little England over the great expanse of waters washing the coasts of this endless Asia, had not been wasted, he believed. He liked to think that this necessary interval—this suspense before the play began—had been consumed in a sort of solidifying of that which had been too fluid within him. Perhaps the discipline both of silent reflection and of enforced isolation among strangers had even drilled out of him a certain idle dross. Very little, he reflected, had really prevented him at the eleventh hour from allowing himself to be shackled by the eternal feminine.

His hurried departure had not permitted him to do more than pen short and hurried farewells—no matter what else he might then have wished to do. In his heart of hearts he believed just then thoroughly in the dictum of a great English general labouring on a Herculean task of reform in another sunburnt land—that work in far-off places can only be done properly by men who have no mistresses but duty and ambition. Married men or men filled with visions of domestic bliss, or even men possessing other bliss, were men with very grave disqualifications for energetic work in such countries. Their hearts could not be in their work if their hearts had been left behind them. That seemed a refreshingly obvious reflection. The right men were undoubtedly the celibates—celibates for a space at least—so that the same unnatural energy which had distinguished the vigorous and militant religious orders of old might be theirs. It was a question of driving-power and tissue. Had not Bacon written, "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief"? Spoken aloud the opinion perhaps sounded a trifle absurd to-day, but he meant to prove it correct. With all his energy and ambition concentrated on his task no obstacles should be too great. Al-

ready the keen regrets he had felt at hurrying so suddenly away from home had been so dimmed that he had almost forgotten them. Peter Kerr had to perfection that convenient capacity for unconscious sophistry—that mixing of fallacious reasoning—which all of us at times possess. He thought it good just then to believe in *"Dieu et mon droit"* in the way that Richard the First did. It was not merely a question of God with the lion-hearted king, but of his right hand as well; for what he said was, "God and my right hand have conquered France." Still Kerr should have known that the age of battle-axes long ago passed away, and that even in Asia the nimble brain has supplanted the strong arm. Those who rely too much on ancient precepts fare badly all over the world, in the East just as much as in the West. But Kerr had that to learn.

Idly reflecting, he stood on the quiet street waiting for his donkeyman to return. It was curiously peaceful and restful here after the immense bustle and clatter of the city gates and the humming, seething highways, and he felt the soothing influence. Also he quickly noted with odd surprise that it was peaceful in a way somehow different from the peacefulness of Europe. He could not account for it exactly just then. Perhaps it was because the smells were different, because the sounds hung strangely in the air. Vague echoes of camel-bells, mixed with the barking of distant dogs, reached him. To this was sometimes added the peculiar *clank-clank-ti-clank* of heavy cart-wheels rattling sharply on their massive axle-trees, as a great rut was met and overcome. That was the only sign of their progress, for the wheels themselves made no sound as they ran on the soft, dust-laden roadways. The long-drawn-out calls of street-sellers, who loitered peacefully along in distant lanes, were borne to him dreamily, at irregular intervals, as the men came gradually nearer. On this street, however, there seemed to be not a soul—the street was a desert.

Also it smelt different—quite different. Mixed with the impalpable dust, which teased and bit the nostrils, was the

vague impression of other biting things, a dust-dried smell of sun-baked things belonging particularly and especially to this land. He could not define all this—only instinctively he noted it. United, these things made the peculiar evening peace—the peculiar atmosphere. Perhaps, he thought, the Chinese, like other Asiatics, were inclined to make noise when they put forth efforts or moved quickly—that is, when they worked or travelled—because noiselessness with them must be inevitably associated with inaction; to break from inaction into action made it necessary to employ the tonic of noise.

Unwilling to leave his pony, he at length peered through the dim archway, beginning to wonder what had really happened to his donkeyman. He had been gone for many minutes. Was the hotel already sunk in sleep? It seemed a very small and original type of hostelry, and anything would be possible. The silence was beginning to jar on him, when fortunately he heard a loud voice drawing near and mixing with the donkeyman's gutturals. He went forward a little from the shadow in which he was standing, and called loudly. It somewhat surprised him, after his satisfied thoughts, to hear that his voice was peremptory and even angry—obviously he had become tired of waiting.

Immediately there was a rush, and in the dim lamplight he saw a tall, thin man, with a curious cadaverous face and very high cheek-bones, come towards him with rapid strides. He was clothed in a khaki riding-suit and had no hat.

"A thousand apologies, sir," began the newcomer in rather florid English, showing by his choice of expressions and his nonchalance rather than by his accent that he was a foreigner. "A thousand apologies for keeping you waiting, but this fool told me first that you were here waiting for me. That is one of the inconveniences of the Chinese language. Good-evening, sir, and welcome." And with this he held out his hand.

Now Peter Kerr elsewhere would have certainly objected to shaking hands with a hotel-keeper immediately on his arrival,

much as he would have objected to shaking hands with the head waiter. But this was no ordinary hotel-keeper, as he was soon to discover—and he was ten thousand miles from home. So, without so much as a smile, he shook hands cordially enough; and it was then forced on his attention that the possessor of the rather cadaverous face had uncommonly strong fingers.

"You are alone—quite alone?" continued his host, peering out on the roadway as the donkeyman led the pony in, as if he doubted the fact.

"Yes," answered Peter Kerr in some surprise, "I telegraphed that. Surely you understood."

The hotel-keeper laughed easily and made a sudden gesture with his hands.

"I understood that you were a single man—but—" he stopped for a minute—"but," he concluded, "one never knows."

Peter Kerr gave him no encouragement, though he was somewhat amused.

"I see you call your hotel by a French name," he observed with a polite show of interest as they walked indoors. "Are you a Frenchman, then?"

"No fear," came the easy answer. "I am a Swiss, though my name is Carnot. Perhaps we were French once, a long time ago, but now I am a Swiss, pure Swiss. And I take care to let every one know it too," he concluded with a confident laugh.

Peter Kerr wondered what might be the methods which this easy-mannered person employed to advertise his nationality; he concluded it must be his brusqueness and his democratic contempt for ceremony of any sort. For, as they walked along the hall of the little hotel, Carnot nodded familiarly to such of his guests as happened to be there, and even exchanged with them some chaffing remarks in French. These stared with open inquisitiveness at Peter Kerr, and Peter Kerr, adapting himself quickly to this new atmosphere and the new rules of life he was picking up, stared back

with interest. There were some curious types, he observed; the hotel must be peculiarly international.

His host led him up a narrow flight of stairs to a bedroom and sitting-room which connected, and which, after the rest of the hotel, looked refreshingly clean and inviting. The hall, for instance, was as bare of all comfort as a barrack-room.

"The best I can do for you," said Carnot with his easy familiarity, waving round a large hand. "It was lucky, too, that you telegraphed me two or three times," he continued, "because I smelt good business in those telegrams and turned the people who were in here out. Otherwise——"

He finished with another wave of his arms, as if to signify that it would have indeed been a poor outlook. Carnot was manifestly an independent spirit; Peter Kerr prepared to meet him in his own way.

"Well, this is first-class anyway," he said, smiling. "If you continue to treat me so well, I shall be your eternal debtor."

The hotel-keeper brushed the acknowledgment aside with a careless laugh. He was obviously seeking for another opening yet trying to restrain himself.

"Will you be here for long?" he asked at last, a little significantly twisting a big bunch of keys which he had drawn from his pocket round his fingers. His nonchalance was a mannerism, Peter Kerr concluded; he wondered what he really wanted to find out.

"Possibly three months, possibly four months, and possibly even five or six," he answered, studying his man closely. "In any case I will take these rooms for half a year at once. And I should be obliged if you would send me up my bill for payment in advance, so that at least you will have no temptation to turn me out."

"That is very liberal," replied Carnot with a sudden bow, an undefinable respect creeping into his manner in spite of himself. "That is very liberal, sir," he repeated. "I am sure I shall be most happy to do all I can for you. There

is only one other gentleman here who appears a long-stayer like yourself—an Italian. There are two or three others who may develop with time—but one never knows. It is impossible to know. Here people come and go in a funny way. There was once a man who stayed for two years."

"Oh," said Peter Kerr carelessly, "globe-trotters mostly, I suppose?"

"No," replied his host with a wink, and his odd familiarity uppermost again, "hunters after concessions—big concessions."

He waited a minute to see whether the Englishman at last would show his hand. But Peter Kerr preserved his impassiveness and gazed thoughtfully at the walls. He was marvelling more and more at this strange type of hotel-keeper; his familiarity with English was exceptional and his curiosity apparently unending. It would be well to be on his guard.

As he stood with his arms swinging carelessly beside him, the Swiss indeed made a suggestive figure. He was like a man ready to clasp anything that came within his reach.

"I suppose every one comes up here with an object," remarked Kerr aloud. "It is certainly such a long way to come that one could not very well drop into the town on a casual visit. It is about ten thousand miles from London."

The Swiss was swinging his keys once more with a half-smile on his face. His inquisitiveness seemed to have left him, or else he had made up his mind to adopt temporarily a different attitude. His next remark pointed to that.

"You are perhaps thirsty, sir?" he said, more civilly than he had spoken before. "The dust is very bad just now."

"Well," said Peter Kerr, smiling amiably, "a drink is always a sound idea. Will you have one with me?"

"With pleasure, with pleasure," cried the Swiss in his odd voice, very loudly this time. "What is it going to be?"

Peter Kerr laughed in spite of himself. This man was irrepressible.

"I think an ordinary whisky and soda for me."

"Good."

With this single word the master of the house was out of the room with a bound, and rushing down the stairs three steps at a time he loudly shouted, "Boy!" Peter Kerr could not resist going out on the landing and glancing down. It was rather opportune that he did so; for he caught a glimpse of a swarthy man with a black beard come across the hall and stop the Swiss in his headlong flight.

"Eh bien?" he heard the man with the black beard say interrogatively. The Swiss laughed a little and spread out his arm in a comprehensive gesture.

"Six mois, cash in advance; *probablement concessions très importants. Je saurais tout plus tard."* It was a strange medley of French and English.

Then he bounded on to get the drinks, whilst the black-bearded man walked reflectively away.

On the landing above Peter Kerr stood for a moment thinking deeply before he went back to his rooms. He was gradually getting his new proportions. Evidently the great thing to realize quickly was that one's own particular business was every one's business. That was an essential point. From now onwards it seemed to him it would be a very complicated game.

CHAPTER III

"J'embrasse mon rival, mais c'est pour l'étouffer."—RACINE, *Britannicus.*

PETER KERR soon settled down in his new quarters. Whether he settled down to the new life he found about him is more open to doubt. It was entirely different to anything he had seen before, and it was really difficult for him to find his bearings. He felt sure it would be a long time before he was acclimatized. However, two days after his arrival he believed that he had taken stock of the situation sufficiently well to send home to those who were anxiously awaiting news of him, his first cablegram. It was short and to the point. It merely said, "I have commenced," thereby implying that the problem was being attacked by him in earnest.

After he had despatched the message, he thought to himself ironically that later he might have to explain that its real purport was that he had commenced to realize the magnitude of the task which confronted him. Such reasoning was almost Jesuitical: still, it was the kind of reasoning which circumstances justified. But this London message was in a measure explained by three other telegrams he sent to points where his survey-parties, which had started from home before him, were already collecting. The burden of these telegrams was merely that the survey-parties should commence operations at once, and work rapidly on the plan which had already been decided. Having been fully instructed previous to their sailing, they needed only to be unleashed by these telegraphic orders to carry out their part of the game. And so, as soon as he had received confirmatory replies, Peter Kerr concentrated his attention on the situation before him with grim resolution. It was indeed no joke.

Now that he was on the spot he quickly realized that the difficulties to be overcome were really immense, and that the reserved stand taken in London by the sceptical Mr. Charles Marten was rather more justified than he would care to admit. The government of China was plainly in a bad way: there was a lack of unity in this government which was almost unbelievable. The real strings of power seemed to have been mysteriously transferred to the hands of a few foreign Ministers, each of whom was eager to test his ability in tripping up the others to the uttermost, and was indeed exhausting every means to attain that satisfactory end. This meant that a grave difficulty, having really nothing to do with the government of the country, would have to be independently overcome; and unless he was able to deal with this difficulty all his work would be vain. His scheme might be the very best in the world—that is, the cheapest, the most businesslike, the most scientific, the most satisfactory; yet that would not alter the fact that it would be fought tooth and nail by all continental governments merely because it had been fathered in London. That was a very important consideration. Also, because it was an independent scheme, a purely financial scheme depending for success on its own merits, it was by no means certain that the British government would ever support it. And this was a still more important consideration.

Especially was Peter Kerr surprised by the remarkable position Russia now held. Viewed at close range, things looked very different from what they had seemed in London, where people who know nothing of the East are always apt to put the wrong end of the telescope to their eyes. The Port Arthur question having been apparently irrevocably settled by a regular convention extorted from China, people on the spot already believed that within thirty-six months Russia would have a couple of thousand miles of railway built in the Chinese provinces of Manchuria, and that this railway invasion would be continued elsewhere. Consequently there appeared to be serious danger of a complete

Chinese surrender to Russia. General Shaw, the old Indian veteran, was right, after all, thought Kerr irritably. Though Germany, ever since her dramatic seizure of Kiao-chow, was also very active, her activity, when viewed on the spot, was plainly very much qualified by restrictions which did not exist in the case of the great northern Power. Russia was geographically so splendidly placed that all obstacles now seemed matters of complete indifference to her. Indeed, she seemed to be constantly pointing, in many subtle ways, to her geography and allowing that alone to convince high Chinese officials, as well as the mysterious Manchu Court hidden behind the impenetrable Palace walls, of the uselessness of opposing a natural force which enveloped half the frontiers of the Celestial Empire and which could at will fall on and completely crush the Chinese colossus just as the northern barbarians of old had constantly done.

That argument, Peter Kerr allowed, was one which no amount of rival diplomacy could discount—it was supreme, unanswerable; and now that he was on the actual battle-ground where so much epoch-making history was being quietly but quickly made, he could properly grasp the nature of the victory Russia had actually gained by the strange withdrawal of the small British squadron from the harbour of Port Arthur so few months ago. He remembered with peculiar interest the dramatic manner in which this act had been announced in far-off London at that dinner when he and Sir James Barker had definitely made up their minds regarding the urgency of their own particular scheme. It was this Russia, now overshadowing everything to such an extent in Peking, which had started their own ball rolling—which had really given them their own impetus and much of their own grand idea. To Russia, in a way, they owed everything.

It was true, as Peter Kerr had lately found out, that during the past forty years several Englishmen, not to speak of other men, had had almost precisely the same scheme as his,

and had actually attempted to perfect it so as to make it acceptable to the authorities, just as he proposed to do.

But with these other people there had been two grand defects: first, that the times had never been ripe for such things; and secondly, that the essential part, the financial part, had never been properly considered and arranged for in advance as had been done in his own particular case. As Barker had so often insisted to him in their frequent discussions, everything in the modern world was really a question of financing. It was not necessary to have money of your own in large quantities; it was not even necessary to have any money at all; but what was always essential was that money should be arranged for in advance so that it would be instantly forthcoming whenever there was something tangible to offer in exchange. That was the secret of modern finance in a nutshell. With that condition fulfilled there was nothing which could not be hoped for or accomplished. Therefore Peter Kerr, fortified by the knowledge that he was in any case far better prepared than any of his predecessors had been, went along very quietly, learning all he could and planning how he should proceed. That is, he engaged interpreters and paid a number of formal visits, and listened and thought and made a vast number of notes which he thought would be useful to him.

There was an immense amount to learn, he found, not so much, perhaps, in really new things as in new arrangements of old things and in puzzling, heart-breaking contradictions. He had truly to go to school again. The Swiss hotel-keeper, who was quite willing to become his cicerone at various odd moments, explained certain minor things in this Peking world with laudable brevity and cynical frankness. He said, perhaps hoping that one confidence would invite another, that the Chinese loved money and that if you spent money freely amongst them you must ultimately get what you wanted—absolutely everything. The Swiss, also at various odd moments, hinted that he was the confidant of those who

were in turn the confidants of the hidden powers inside the great mysterious pink Palace, and that in China all things are arranged in curious ways—especially such novelties as concessions. To which Peter Kerr, for the time being, only good-humouredly smiled, perhaps asking his host in the end if he would care to join him in a drink. Later on he discovered that Carnot's most impossible stories were mostly based on sober facts, and that it was absolutely true that some of the most extraordinary things had really been accomplished by rank bribery and corruption, and that therefore the most humble men were often the most important factors in solving a difficult problem. But that was very much later.

Just then, in all truth, it was very hard for him to know where to commence. He had met the diplomatic representative of his own country and had told him vaguely that he was on a mission of inquiry regarding railways. Even in those days there were beginning to be so many people of this sort, that he was deemed no novelty. He had found his Minister a most amiable man. He was tall and decidedly thin, and used his right hand freely to punctuate his periods in a rather foreign way. He assured him, somewhat superfluously, that he would do all in his power to forward his interests, should his instructions be to that effect; but he added significantly that the present times were not very auspicious for concessionnaires. He appeared not to know all he should regarding people at home, and he seemed nervous lest he should disclose this to his visitor. In other words, he did not seem entirely sure of his own ground or of his own position. Still, he was very amiable and scrupulously polite.

Peter Kerr listened carefully to what was told him, and then marched off and obtained an introduction to the Russian Minister, so that whilst his impressions were fresh he might juxtapose the respective attitudes of these two men. By this he hoped that he might learn something which would later serve him in good stead.

He was very much surprised with the Russian Minister. He appeared to be a most peculiar man, irascible, uneasy, dissatisfied. He talked very freely to Peter Kerr, stroking his black beard all the while, and stretching out his immense legs as if they were unbearably cramped through being confined all day and half the night within the limits of a narrow office—a narrow office, which was the real key to the whole problem! His knowledge of English was as surprising to Kerr as that of his Swiss host; not only did he talk idiomatically, but he had a peculiarly illuminating slang to fill in gaps of his conversation which few Englishmen could have surpassed. Also he was very blunt, thus upsetting Peter Kerr's preconceived idea that Russians are inevitably smooth; for at the end of the visit he suddenly turned on his visitor and said:

"And now what is your business in Peking—what is your mission—mines or railways?"

Peter Kerr laughed in spite of himself; this directness was certainly refreshing after what he had experienced elsewhere.

"Well, to be quite frank," he replied good-humouredly, "I am after any concessions I can get. What they may happen to be will depend upon my luck."

After that for a while they talked on in scraps, as men are apt to talk in a railway-carriage, when they know that it is a question of minutes before they will have to part.

The Russian Minister smiled a trifle grimly when he got up to bid him farewell.

"You ought to be a diplomat," he said briefly, "for you fenced my questions in quite an old-fashioned way. We of the *métier* have long given that up—at least we say so! However, remember one thing—which is, that as soon as you show your first card here in Peking your whole hand will be known. It will be common gossip." And with that he let him go. It was rather kind of him to give an Englishman a warning.

After this visit Peter Kerr began to be infected with some despondency, although the time had certainly not arrived for

anything practical to be done. He managed to meet several high Chinese officials, and through interpreters who talked volubly but somewhat meaninglessly, he felt his way as best he could regarding the possibility of interesting them in his proposals. But he found that although business of a certain sort was to be done, thanks to the educating influence of the many persons who in former years had haunted the capital with ready cheque-books in their hands, what he proposed was too comprehensive and too audacious for such methods to be lightly employed. If the field had been completely clear, he might possibly have placed himself in the hands of his own Minister, and, relying upon the credentials which he carried, enforced official co-operation.

But he was too wise to attempt that. He knew that Mr. Charles Marten, thanks to the large Asiatic interests he represented, could demand as his right that he be given priority over all other competitors. Very possibly steps had already been taken to prevent Sir James Barker's syndicate from receiving any official support. It was quite likely that this had been done: for higher finance in one important particular resembles love and war—all is fair so long as you win in the end. Kerr wondered at times whether he had not been too optimistic. Still, he refused to admit even to himself that he had wished to bite off a too big piece of this rich Chinese cake. He bided his time, and continued to write up a comprehensive diary whilst gradually making himself *au courant* with this strange new world. He knew that presently his surveyors would be sending him in rough surveys and estimates, which would allow him to know exactly how much he could afford to pay in cash for the vast concession he sought. And then he hoped that in the course of a few more weeks he would also know more exactly who were the proper people of all these high officials of Peking to treat with. When his data were more complete he would try a sudden *coup*—that was his attitude.

So meanwhile he bought ponies and began to explore this historic city, riding in a hundred different directions and pick-

ing up many odds and ends in the way of curios from men in long blue coats who besieged the hotel at specified hours, and who undid their blue-cloth bundles to bring forth endless varieties of jade and porcelain and cloisonné and lacquer, and other things both beautiful and hideous.

CHAPTER IV

"Je pardonne aux autres de ne pas être de mon avis, mais je ne leur pardonne pas de ne pas être du leur."—TALLEYRAND.

THOUGH it soon seemed to him, in spite of his determination not to be discouraged, that things were not moving at all, and that the problem was becoming more and more disconcerting, slowly new elements were being prepared which would lead to developments he little suspected. It may be here prosaically remarked that there is undoubtedly such a thing as Fate—different, perhaps, from the various vulgar conceptions of it which have always existed among the superstitious, but still not so different as is popularly imagined. Without believing in the goddesses Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, one may safely believe that the birth, life, and death of men is part of a scheme practically settled in advance. To imagine the contrary is to be merely a bigot, or else the experience of the world counts for nothing.

Peter Kerr had tried to preserve a distant attitude in the little hotel, so as not to be drawn too rapidly into intimacy with those whom the Swiss picturesquely designated as his permanents or semi-permanents. But it needed a very short time to break down this reserve; for it was impossible in such a small community—which was really nothing but a tiny European oasis in the midst of a great and barbaric desert—to act as if one hid within one's breast some tremendous and possibly criminal secret. The easiest way obviously was to pretend that there was no secret at all—that one's business was really very unimportant. And this was the attitude he adopted as soon as he had seen the absurdity of the other.

Still, there were some queer types at the hotel, and it

seemed to him well to be on his guard against possible espionage with so many big intrigues going on. Locks and keys were therefore much better than a locked mouth. People had already told him strange stories of the manner in which men in this capital had triumphed over their rivals in large politico-financial affairs; and though possibly many of the stories were arrant lies, they were interesting and useful as warnings. In any case, whether he willed it or not, having been allowed for a short space to look at things so to speak from the outside, he was suddenly brought into intimate relations with his immediate surroundings by a few small incidents.

At the next table to his in the informal little dining-room sat the selfsame black-bearded Italian who had seemed so curious about his business the night of his arrival. For a few days the Italian had merely watched him curiously, as if to see what manner of man he was; then, one morning, apparently satisfied with this study, he suddenly nodded to him in a friendly way as they took their seats.

That evening it was perhaps not merely chance which caused Carnot to bring the Italian, when dinner was hardly finished, several bottles which he placed with tender care on the table. As soon as this was done, with a wink and a rude clack of the tongue the Swiss began in his usual loud way: *"Eh bien, Monsieur Lorenzo, voilà finalement de cette fine champagne qui vous a tellement plu. Mais ça été le vol pur et simple, et il ne faut pas trop en parler."*

Having thus announced to every one still in the dining-room exactly what they wanted to know, Carnot withdrew, with nothing more than a careless nod from the Italian. Doubtlessly Carnot received his proper thanks at some other time: he appeared to expect nothing further just now.

Meanwhile, Lorenzo puffed away at a big cigar and slowly undid the tissue-paper covering of one of these precious bottles. As soon as he had removed the paper, he read the label appreciatively. This label apparently afforded him so much pleasure that some minutes elapsed before he men-

tioned to the noiseless *boy*, who was looking steadily over his shoulder with sheeplike eyes, that he needed a corkscrew. When that had been brought him, with his own hands he carefully uncorked the bottle, smelling its contents with a still more appreciative smile. There was indeed an appearance of soft joy on his face which no actor could have surpassed. It was quite taking, and the curiosity of his servant became intensified. This would be good wine to steal!

Peter Kerr, who had watched this elaborate pantomime without changing a muscle, fully expected what was coming. He was not disappointed. The Italian looked up suddenly, and catching his eye, smiled pleasantly across to him.

"May I offer you a glass?" he inquired very civilly in perfect English. "That remarkable rascal Carnot has managed at last to steal a few bottles for me. It is the only drinkable cognac in the whole of Peking, and I discovered its existence just a week ago. I will tell you about it in a few minutes."

His manner was so remarkably easy and friendly that no one could have refused him.

"It's very kind of you," said Peter Kerr at once, making as if he would rise, "I shall be most happy." He pushed back his chair a little.

"No, no, don't trouble," said Lorenzo protestingly. "If you will allow me, I will come and join you." And not waiting for an answer, he carried the bottle as well as two little glasses which he had mysteriously acquired, across to Kerr's table. Then, seating himself, he filled the little glasses with elaborate care, and handing one to the Englishman, he raised the other to his lips.

"To ourselves," he said gravely. "And also to the genius who procured the bottles."

He sipped the cognac carefully with the air of a connoisseur. A peculiar appreciation soon stole into his bright eyes. This time there was no acting: his palate was evidently most deliciously tickled.

"It is certainly remarkably good," ventured Peter Kerr, who really did not care for cognac.

"No brandy as good as this can ever have come to China before," the Italian rejoined solemnly. He spoke as if he were adjudicating on a matter of the highest importance. Then he gazed steadily at the long-necked bottle as if it entranced him.

"It is genuine cognac, worth anything a bottle in France," he continued after a few minutes. "It cannot be bought; it can only be stolen."

"Carnot can be a very useful person, then," said Peter Kerr smilingly. The conversation had not yet fallen into an easy channel, and he was not sure whether several people across the room were not watching them now with highly interested eyes.

"Carnot is a great man," rejoined Lorenzo, leaning over and speaking quite confidentially, so that no one else could hear. "He can do almost anything. I am sure he employs the biggest rascals in the town."

It was easy to see that the man was in a talkative mood—that he had many days' energy stored up to expend now—if the occasion warranted it. And so Peter Kerr, with nothing in the world to occupy him, save perhaps to go as a last resource to the little Club, and there to handle newspapers and magazines almost two months old, leant back contentedly in his chair and blew reflective clouds of smoke into the air. The opening was not unpromising: perhaps he would learn a great deal of minor importance.

"And what do you think of Peking now that you have been here nearly a week—that is, six days?" continued the Italian, openly inquisitive. It could not have been for nothing that he had kept such an exact count of the days. Kerr noted the fact at once with some curiosity. Promptly he prepared to be picturesque rather than political.

"I think it is a wonderful place in many ways, and the most wonderful thing of all is that it must be almost

exactly what it must have been when that illustrious countryman of yours came here six centuries ago."

"My countryman?" echoed Lorenzo, looking somewhat puzzled. His shirt-cuffs had slipped far out, and Kerr noted that his links were over-elaborate with turquoise and chased gold.

"I mean Marco Polo—the traveller of travellers."

"Ah!" said the Italian a little vaguely, sitting up straight and pushing back his cuffs after regarding them tenderly. Possibly he had forgotten who Marco Polo was, or else it simply was that he had no sympathy for the English mania of remembering dates, authorities, and personalities and making endless conversation round them.

"It is very wonderful, perhaps, but also very dirty," he went on after a short pause, returning quickly to modern actualities. "Imagine, for instance, what it would be like if there was not this hotel! Yet a few years ago there was none, and our predecessors in the concessionnairing market must have had a happy time in Chinese inns."

As he finished he looked lazily across the table through half-closed eyes. Manifestly he had an object in view which he proposed to attain as speedily as possible. He did not even think it worth while dissimulating. It was cool.

But Kerr could appear singularly unemotional when he so wished; now he determined not to notice the reference which placed him and his interlocutor on the same slow road. But perhaps the Italian would soon put a question point-blank: he wondered how he had better take that if it came.

"The Chinese inns may be pretty bad," he remarked aloud, as if he had only noticed that reference, "but a man was telling me yesterday that when Gordon came up here some years ago to say farewell to China he actually stayed for a number of days in a common inn in the Chinese city—the Outer city—so as to avoid people."

"Ah!" said the Italian vaguely a second time, opening his eyes wide, and then letting the lids drop again. Perhaps he did not recollect the name of Gordon: perhaps he was

purposely stupid. In any case, it was plain that he wished to keep the conversation strictly under his control. He now leant forward and slowly refilled the little glasses, at the same time puffing quickly at his cigar. The rings of smoke he blew from his mobile mouth hung heavily in the dry, hot air of the dining-room and formed fantastic designs which appeared to fascinate him.

"I have been here four months," he said at length, resuming the conversation at the point that pleased him, "and the place bores me. Frankly, if it were not for my business I would not stay another day. I am certain I should get curious—eccentric, you call it, do you not?—if I stayed another year. But I shall not stay another year. In two months my business will be finished—quite finished. I speak honestly."

He stopped suddenly and looked squarely at Peter Kerr. If he had been given the slightest opening he would have undoubtedly taken it just then; but Kerr was still singularly unresponsive and sat quietly with his chin in his hand. It was impossible to say what he was thinking about.

The Italian, foiled a second time, gave a short laugh, as if the amusing side of this curious duel had just struck him. He looked at Kerr once more: Kerr had not moved.

"Madonna santa!" he murmured under his breath. Then he laughed again. It was so plain that he was laughing at the stubbornness which he was encountering, that Kerr wondered at his effrontery. But the Italian was a clever man. He had been within an ace of becoming angry. Now he speedily recovered himself by dissimulating. He flicked a finger quickly in the direction of the dining-room door, out of which the last people had just gone.

"I was laughing at the funny people at this funny hotel," he remarked with transparent duplicity. "Have you noticed them? What a queer collection to be gathered together in such a place! Carnot tells me that we comprise six nationalities—five British, three French, two Belgians, one German, one Italian, and one American, total thirteen, which is an unlucky number."

"Are there so many?" rejoined Peter Kerr, showing sudden interest, yet secretly wondering how this would be turned. "There do not appear to be even a dozen rooms in the whole hotel; there are certainly never more than eight people in the dining-room, if one excludes Carnot and his wife. I have counted them often."

The Italian laughed softly, as if now he were amused at the Englishman's innocence. His laugh was singularly musical, for he had a rich voice—but it ended as suddenly as it began. He did it rather curiously, as if laughter was a thing to finish with quickly—an unnecessary thing, a mere temporary convenience. Now he began talking in staccato sentences, which showed his nationality more than his accent.

"Have you never noticed before in hotels that many people prefer not to appear in public? Well, in this queer inn it is much the same thing. There are four people who certainly never appear, if they can help it. I will enlighten you. First there is a Frenchman and his wife; second, there is an Englishman and an English lady. There is nothing very curious about the first two, excepting that the husband is very small and very ugly and that therefore I detest him. As for the other two, they are certainly the two most curious characters in the world. The Englishman is tall and lanky and very polite—he is what would be called anywhere very *distingué*; the Englishwoman is small and quick, wears short skirts, and has short, curly hair like Rosa Bonheur. When he rides, she runs alongside like a dog. Is that good or not? To see them like that is one of the most extraordinary sights in the world. Also, they say she wears a golden snake round her waist underneath, as a last cash reserve. Even Carnot does not quite understand them; they are the most remarkable he has seen in ten years. They amuse me."

The cosmopolitan Italian laughed, quite satisfied with himself. He could be very good company when he chose to exert himself, and now with an excellent cognac to help him along and with a very special object in view, he speedily forgot his

first irritation. Apart from two or three dining-room *boys* clad in their sober blue coats, they had the place absolutely to themselves. The servants were noiselessly removing plates and glasses and at the same time conducting an animated discussion in whispers, full of strange gutturals and hissing sibilants, through a trap-door with unseen persons in the pantry. They might as well have belonged to another planet.

"Well," Lorenzo said, more familiarly than hitherto, "you will know as much about these people as I do when you have been here six months. One's business does not occupy one overmuch in this place; waiting for these excellent Chinese officials to realize the importance of one's proposals is the principal affair. Thank fortune I am several stages ahead of you; in two months I shall certainly be gone. I shall not be sorry."

Peter Kerr shifted his position and glanced keenly across the table. Lorenzo's was not a bad face, though the eyes were quick and rather cunning. He suddenly made up his mind that he might as well learn at once what he could.

"Do you believe that it is really only a question of waiting?"

A gleam of satisfaction shot across the Italian's face. Instead of answering at once, however, he took up the bottle of cognac again and helped himself to a fourth little glass. The Englishman had not yet finished his second.

"It is a question of waiting and paying," he said with commendable brevity, when he was ready, pressing his lips together in a queer way after each sentence had been concluded. "Let us come to the point. I feel very much like being frank to-night. I will be exact with you. I have spent nearly all my cash in accomplishing my end—about £8,000—and I calculate that this sum may just do. My concession when it is forthcoming may be worth a quarter of a million to me. But," he concluded apologetically, "mine is only mining—nothing but a little mining. Railways, for instance, cost a fortune. With my eight thousand I would have done nothing in that direction. Oh, no." He threw up a deprecating hand and shook his head.

Peter Kerr once more glanced keenly at him.

"What do you call a fortune here," he inquired—"fifty thousand pounds, a hundred thousand—more?"

"More—perhaps," replied the Italian with rising emphasis. Once more he brought his lips together in the same peculiar way. Then he leaned across the table and placed one hand on the sleeve of Peter Kerr's coat.

"Excuse me," he said, "shall we talk straight—quite straight? I know what I know from hard experience, and though I say it myself, you may trust me. I have been buying my experience month after month. You may help me later on—in London. I can help you here. I have many ideas and many methods. What do you say? You are a man of intelligence—you must understand that special methods are necessary—that it is useless to act as in Europe."

"Well——" Peter Kerr uttered this single word, only to hesitate and have nothing more to say. The English have been perhaps the last people in the world to settle their business even with their familiars in the new way—that is, out of their offices. When it comes to dealing with a stranger in strange surroundings, in spite of themselves they always exhibit open distrust.

Peter Kerr was no exception to this rule. Though he had almost come to the point when he was forced to admit to himself that he did not begin to see how he should act to make his great venture feasible, the very idea of placing any part of it at the mercy of another man was distasteful to him. Whilst any way out of the general *impasse* which he found in Peking was not yet to be discovered, he did not know whether this man could really help him or not.

So he sat there frowning to himself in dead silence and in great doubt, as oblivious to the Italian's existence as if he had been out of the room. Lorenzo, on his part, quite content with what he had done, impassively puffed his fat cigar and bided his time. In any case he had broken the ice; the rest could wait.

What Peter Kerr would have actually done if he had been

forced to reply there and then, must remain an unanswered question. Possibly he would have avoided committing himself definitely and begged for time. But as it happened, just then, following a sudden slamming of the outer hall doors, came the quick run of feet; and almost instantly a curious girl-like little woman stood framed in the dining-room doorway. She paused there for a moment, standing on the tips of her toes and glancing vaguely into the room. By some strange chance she missed the two men, now sitting so silently at their corner table, and seeing only one or two of the Chinese servants still working in their fitful manner, she suddenly made up her mind and ran blithely across to where stood an old piano. In an instant she had seated herself before the instrument and began running her fingers up and down the keys in a ripple of music. It was a very providential interruption.

The Italian had at first begun to mutter furiously to himself; then, when he realized that they had not been seen and that this was an experience out of the common, he suddenly checked himself and quietly twisted round in his chair. It would in any case only be a matter of a few minutes—and he was by nature, like all Latins, very inquisitive and curious about everything in the world. So he prepared to enjoy himself. From the manner in which he acted, one might have thought him in the stalls of a theatre.

"The Englishwoman of the Englishman," he whispered to Peter Kerr.

Her playing had changed from its first hesitation into the opening of a song. Now in a small but sweet voice she began singing:

> "If in the great Bazaars
> They sold the golden stars,
> Beloved, there should be
> A necklace strung for thee——"

And just then hasty footsteps suddenly sounded in the hall once more, and a tall, thin man came quickly into the dining-room.

"Elsie, Elsie," he called remonstratingly, "I wondered where you had got to when I missed you. Elsie, remember this is a public room; any one might come—you have your own piano. Elsie, I must ask you—I beg your pardon——"

The tall, thin man coloured to the roots of his hair as he suddenly became aware that he was being observed with special interest by the two men seated silently at their table. He fidgeted for a moment with his tie, hardly knowing what to do.

"Elsie," he began once more, "are you aware that you are not alone? Are you aware——"

The curious, girl-like woman, with her fingers still softly touching the piano-keys and her back to the room, was oblivious to what was passing behind her.

"Jack," she cried, without turning her head and still playing the refrain, "you are a bother to-day, a regular nuisance. I am sick of being cooped up, and I like this ever so much better." And running her fingers down the keys, she began singing again, this time with all the strength of her lungs, so as fitly to breathe her defiance.

"If I could buy the mist
By Dawn's pale lips kissed——"

The tall, thin man paused with such tragic despair written on his face, that Lorenzo suddenly and spontaneously laughed. It so happened that his laugh came at a pause in the music, and his full voice sounded for an instant so clearly that inevitably it caught the ear of the singer. At once she stopped with a jerk, slammed down the piano, and wheeled round on her stool. There she sat motionless for a moment, looking into the room. It was impossible to say whether she was very angry or only rather surprised. Peter Kerr noticed that she had curious big blue eyes—her eyes immediately attracted attention.

"Oh," she said at last, getting up and sauntering into the middle of the room carelessly, "I am awfully sorry if I bothered you with my noise. I didn't know anybody was

here. Jack," she cried, "why didn't you let me know? Jack, how stupid we all are to-day!"

The unfortunate tall, thin man, so diffident and so polite in his manner, was covered with further embarrassment.

"But, Elsie, I did tell you," he protested. "Elsie, I wanted you to stop. I——"

He probably would have gone on if any one had paid any attention, but the little woman had walked a little nearer to the two men, who had now apologetically risen from their seats.

"Oh," she said suddenly, "it is Mr. Lorenzo. Excuse me, Mr. Lorenzo, for not knowing you before. Carnot, the great Carnot, speaks to me constantly of you. He has a great opinion of you."

The Italian bowed deeply. He was a little at a loss how to act, though not at such a loss as Kerr.

The tall, thin man fingered his blond moustache in the same despair; if an opening had been vouchsafed him he would have doubtless begun his furtive protests anew. But no attention was paid to him. His companion had seated herself near the two men, whilst she smiled vaguely at nothing in particular. Men's embarrassment very often contributes materially to the enjoyment of women. It is like iron or arsenic—good for the system.

"I feel stupid to-night," began the little woman. "Peking has got on my nerves. It is such a curious, old-world place, and one is so isolated."

She sighed, and passed her fingers thoughtfully through her curly hair.

"Jack," she continued, resuming her onslaught suddenly, without turning her head, "don't be stupid too, and above all don't look miserable. I can see you are miserable without looking round. I feel bad enough myself without having that to worry me. Jack, order some Pommery—a big bottle—and let us all have a drink together. Let us be merry. I am sure you will join me," she concluded, turning with a smile to the two men. She had a gracious little

manner of her own—when she took the trouble to give attention to what she was doing. Otherwise she was curiously *distraite,* as if she hardly noticed that there were other things in the world besides herself.

The two men murmured something unintelligible, and waited to see what happened before moving. Lorenzo's interest had already evaporated. Since the interruption had come exactly at the wrong moment, he did not relish the idea of having to make conversation about nothing in particular. As for Peter Kerr, he was wondering what the proper etiquette might be under these peculiar circumstances. Perhaps the tall, thin man might get angry, and then it would be singularly awkward.

Fortunately, the servants, with Oriental phlegm, solved the problem. Since it was the most natural thing in the world that these strange outlanders should act just as the mood seized them, they merely pushed two tables together, brought glasses and began pouring out the sparkling wine.

"Come, Jack," said the queer little woman gaily, "sit down and be sociable. This is Mr. Smith," she said by way of introduction to the Italian and Peter Kerr as she lifted her glass to them.

None of the three seated themselves at once, and tall, thin Mr. Smith, to relieve the embarrassment, took from his pocket a cigarette-case on which Lorenzo's quick eyes discerned an unmistakable gold coronet. Mr. Smith offered its contents in the same deferential manner that he did everything, and finding that nobody wished to smoke his cigarettes, he finally replaced the case in his pocket with a little sigh.

"Shall we sit down?" he said resignedly.

"What, not smoking, Jack?" chided the little woman. "We must cheer up. This will never do."

Her fingers deftly extracted the case from his pocket once more; she took out two cigarettes, and putting one between her lips, handed him the other.

"Now," she said, "let us attempt to enjoy ourselves, even if we dismally fail."

For a while they debated the charms of curio-collecting and wondered whether most of the things in the town were modern frauds. But though they managed to do a good deal of talking, there was no real conversation, and when the Pommery came to an end they parted with far more enthusiasm than they had talked.

CHAPTER V

"La nuit tous les chats sont gris."
French Proverb.

AFTER bidding good-night to this ill-assorted trio, Peter Kerr came very slowly and thoughtfully up the somewhat primitive little hotel staircase. Though Lorenzo, just before leaving him, had attempted to return to the charge with his offer of co-operation, Kerr had evaded giving any definite undertaking with the excuse that he must give the whole matter thought. Now he was no longer thinking of this business matter; his mind had sped thousands of miles away. An acute sense of loneliness had for some reason suddenly stolen over him; a sense of isolation, of unenviable exile—and this made him remember things he thought he was forgetting. The French understand so well this heart-searching and heart-aching of exiles that they name it *une inquiétude de déraciné*—which is an admirable way of expressing a difficult matter. The poor, uprooted tree, if it could only tell us its thoughts, would certainly make us weep. Perhaps that is why nature has not given to all living things the power of speech, knowing well that man—the master of all—has already his full burden to carry from his own sorrows, without listening to the sorrows of all those that are dumb though they may suffer immensely.

Peter Kerr did not know why he should feel like that. Possibly his mood had been induced by the various trivial incidents of the evening; incidents which, notwithstanding their triviality, when linked together formed a chain of things all crudely suggestive of his present impotence—of having become a mere shuttlecock to be beaten here and there by the battledores of fate. Certainly the attitude of

the Italian—and the manner in which he had cynically dwelt on the fact that to employ time-honoured methods would be labour lost here—had made a powerful impression on Peter Kerr's mind; for his mind was quite ready for that impression. Equally certain was it that the diffident gentleman, who had followed in such a weak, protesting way the little whirlwind of a woman with the strange eyes as if he had been only a straw sucked along after her, seemed emblematic of the manner in which all things moved here. Somehow that had jarred him very much. Everything was different—very different to what he was accustomed to. Lorenzo was evidently right. In this far-off world it was a question of being able to meet new conditions by rough-and-ready methods; of being able to translate strange texts with the aid of stranger interpreters; of finding solutions in almost mediæval ways. Just then nothing about this pleased him. He disliked the outlook intensely; for, not being a poor man, he did not have to shut his eyes to many things which poor men cannot afford to see. What a pity England was really such an immense distance away! It was like thinking of another planet—a planet from which he had cut himself off of his own free will. Had he been, say, only two or three thousand miles away instead of ten thousand, a temporary retreat would have been possible. Now retreat would mean defeat and nothing else. . . .

From this it will be gathered that Peter Kerr stalked into his bedroom in a very moody frame of mind. Quite mechanically he turned up the lamp which his methodical Chinese *boy* had left ready for him. Then he paused irresolutely.

What should he do? On looking at his watch he found that it was past midnight; and still the night-sounds of this barbaric town, which spread so mightily within its great ramparts, were stealing through his open windows in little puffs and gusts of uneasiness. The city seemed a sleepless city. The curious clatter-rattle of the heavy-wheeled carts

on the soft road beneath his windows was slowly coming to an end; but the distant barking of dogs, which is such a feature in a city where every house has its guardian cur, still continued unabated, as if all manner of evil things were going on in deserted lanes. There must be many people afoot, he thought, or else the dogs would not bark. The monotonous, long-drawn-out cries of the sellers of night-cakes—men engaged in vending their wares almost until dawn—echoed romantically and mysteriously in the still atmosphere, suggesting yet other things. Occasionally, too, some one passed immediately under his windows singing in the curious, nasal falsetto of the East, and interrupting this cadence at unexpected places, only to begin after each such pause with renewed ardour. Such singing was to frighten the evil spirits away. Because the hotel itself had become quite quiet, these outer noises fell all the sharper on his ear. They seemed to advertise the sleeplessness of night. In the hotel compound, the watchman's bamboo rattle, beaten faintly through the courtyards in a peculiar, quick tick-tack, and more loudly in long beats when the man passed out on to the street, had begun to play as it would play all night. Apart from the watchman's rattle, in the hotel itself it had become almost oppressively quiet, with that hollowness of silence, which is sometimes more jarring to the nerves than noise.

Peter Kerr, having prepared himself for bed, lighted a cigar and looked idly for a book. He wished to distract his attention; to be carried away by some enchantment from his present surroundings. He would like, when he went to sleep, at least to imagine that he was not where he was—that he had flown away. A good book might do that for him; and so he tried to select a likely volume from the stack on his table.

He had placed his hand on the lamp in order to adjust it for his reading, when a peculiar sound made him pause and prick his ears. He stood motionless for a bit, puffing at his cigar and closely listening. Then an expression of surprise

crossed his face. Without a word, slowly and cautiously he began turning the lamp-wick down, so that the arc of light gradually diminished until at length the room became quite dim. He waited until he had almost turned the light out before moving; then, feeling his way by means of the chairs and tables, he passed from his bedroom to his sitting-room and then on to the verandah, which, after the manner of the East, ran completely round the house to give protection to the outer rooms from the beating rays of the fierce summer sun. Afterwards he wondered why he had acted in that particular way.

The night, though not very dark, was not clear enough to throw much light on the situation. But his ears were of more value than his eyes. Here on the verandah, as he stood stock-still, there was no doubt about it at all. His first surmise had been correct. Somewhere, not far off—indeed, very close to him—a woman was gently crying to herself. He could even distinguish, between her stifled sobs, vague muttered words. For a moment he thought that this might be the strange little Englishwoman of whose existence he had that evening so suddenly become aware. Something had happened. That high rebellious mood in which she had been had given place to the inevitable reaction—and tears. Already he had begun to arrange the scenario of a little tragedy, with the irresolute man suddenly become brutal and harshly dominating the situation, when he recollected that Lorenzo had told him that these people had rooms downstairs. He was jumping at absurd conclusions. His own unconscious sciomachy—his fighting with shadows—was making him unduly imaginative. A sudden revulsion of feeling seized him and he even began to go back. Then fresh sounds caught his ears—and he stayed. He was not really anxious to read a book, he thought.

He was able soon to decide, from the occasional creaking of a cane chair, that whoever this person might be, not more than twenty or thirty feet of space divided them. Curiosity

gained him more and more. Presently, as all the vague night's sounds entirely ceased for a moment, he made out some muttered words in French.

At once he jumped to a fresh conclusion. This time he was fully persuaded that it must be correct. It must be the wife of the mysterious Frenchman who never appeared. Kerr suddenly felt disappointed. There had probably been a quarrel, and after the manner of women, the wife was seeking consolation in tears. Peter Kerr certainly did not feel in that quixotic mood which impels one to assist people in distress. In any case, there was the man to be considered—and the man would keenly resent his intrusion, no matter what the lady said.

He was turning to go, satisfied with this philosophy, when he heard the cane chair suddenly creak violently. Then there was a hard thud and a low cry, followed by the sound of a fall. What the deuce had happened?

"Confound it!" he said under his breath, this time in sheer annoyance because he was so puzzled and perplexed. Yet after a brief pause he stepped forward resolutely and called quite loudly. There was absolute silence. In any case she must be alone just now. Otherwise——

"That settles it," he muttered, quickly forgetting all his previous reasoning; and match-box in hand he now advanced cautiously down the verandah until he judged that he covered the distance. Then he struck a match. In the sudden flare of light he saw lying a few yards from him, motionless on the floor, a woman. Beside her there was a cane long-chair. There was nothing else. He could not understand what had happened.

The match blew out, but he had measured the distance, and in a few steps he had reached the prostrate form and was bending down. Another match showed him a little trickle of blood running down a white face. Abandoning his match, he gathered the prostrate woman resolutely up in his arms and rapidly retraced his footsteps. This was much more serious than he had supposed. Setting his burden

unceremoniously on the floor of his sitting-room, he fetched the lamp and turned the light up. It surprised him to see that his hand was not quite steady. He had certainly become a little excited.

The blood had flowed more quickly with the movement of carrying, and now formed an ugly patch down her face and neck and even on to her clothes. With the aid of a jug of water and a towel he wiped away these ugly stains as well as he could and traced the flow of blood to its source. There was a small but deep cut just above the temple, he found; and whilst he carefully smoothed back the hair he looked at her pallid face. With quick fingers he now ripped a handkerchief in two, and soaking one part in water he had soon made a bandage which he secured over the wound. Then he seized a whisky flask in the same rapid way, and half corking the bottle with a finger, he let the spirit drop between her lips. He hadn't an idea whether this was right or not, but it seemed the best he could do. He suddenly remembered that in such cases it was also customary to loosen things; but when a woman is in a loose kimono it is embarrassing to know where to commence. So he stayed his hands, after an ineffective investigation. She would certainly come to suddenly, and he did not want to appear unduly officious.

To his irritation, he found his calculations once more go astray. Judging by the sound in her throat the spirit certainly choked her—yet she did not revive. He vaguely remembered that burning feathers was an ancient remedy well spoken of; but unfortunately he certainly had no feathers in his rooms. In semi-despair, he took a bottle of eau de Cologne, and deluging another handkerchief with its contents deliberately he laid it across her mouth and nose. That should be enough to raise a dead person. He watched with the eye of a daring experimentalist. Yes!

She had made two or three sudden movements with her arms, and now plucked frantically at her face with her long, thin hands.

"Ah, non, non," she cried. Half rising, in her agitation she pulled the handkerchief sharply away. Kerr dropped on his knees and assisted her to a sitting position with one arm, whilst with the other he attempted to keep the bandage in place.

"How do you feel?" he said with assumed cheerfulness, feeling for some reason very much of a fool.

Her eyes blinked confusedly in the bright light, as if she did not understand; then suddenly she came completely to herself.

"Qu'est ce qu'il à?" she cried, pulling away and looking round in open alarm. "What is it? Who are you?" she continued in English. "What have you done to me?"

Her bosom began to heave tumultuously.

"I am sorry," began Peter Kerr penitently, releasing his hold and standing up. "I am sorry, but I found you—lying on the verandah, and as there was nothing else to do I had to bring you in here to see what was the matter."

He wondered why he should feel that it was all his own fault.

"Yes, but what have you done—what have you done?" she exclaimed as she felt the bandage round her head, and at the same time caught sight of the blood-stained towel on the floor. "Look!" She pointed an accusing finger at the towel.

With sudden irritation Peter Kerr picked it up and flung it out of the room. This had been an evening of many events.

"The problem is not as complicated as it may appear to you," he said severely—"that is, if you could give me a few seconds to explain——"

"But how is it——" She hesitated and coloured, began again, and stopped once more. She was looking at him—looking with resentful eyes. Peter Kerr coloured too—but it was from righteous anger.

"I am extremely sorry," he began, turning away and then crossing his arms defiantly. "It is true that I am not dressed,

for the very good reason that I do not go to bed in my clothes." He could not help smiling, but he quickly checked himself. "You will pardon my mentioning that I was just going to bed—that if it had not been for you, I should now perhaps be sound asleep. It was because I heard somebody fall heavily that I went out and found you lying on the verandah with your head cut and bleeding——"

"What, cut and bleeding!"

She had left the rest unnoticed.

"Well," replied Peter Kerr in matter-of-fact tones, "you saw that towel yourself. If you feel your head carefully——"

Instantly her hands were busy with the bandage. From her lips bubbled a stream of half-suppressed exclamations.

"Be careful," uttered Peter Kerr warningly, in spite of himself, knowing that the bleeding would very easily commence again. "Let me help you," and coming forward he assisted her to her feet. But having done that he at once fell back to a discreet distance. He was still feeling offended.

"You have been very kind," said his companion after a brief pause, looking at him with gratitude, and still holding her head. He saw that her eyes were hazel brown and soft, and his indignation suddenly evanesced. He inclined his head.

"I am sorry if I was rude," continued the lady, as if talking relieved her feelings, "but you will forgive me, I am sure."

"I have nothing to forgive," began Peter Kerr. "I am sure that——" She stopped him before he could go any farther.

"No, I was rude, I know, but then I was unhappy, very unhappy, and this has greatly shaken me."

She coloured once more and then looked down. Peter Kerr did not wonder so much now. It was rather a quaint situation.

"It resembles vaguely the parable of the Good Samaritan,"

he said cheerfully, trying to adopt an impersonal attitude.

"The story in the Bible, you mean?" she said, suddenly closing her eyes. Her pallor had begun to return, and he became alarmed at the prospect.

"Of course," he answered, talking against time and sincerely hoping that she was not going to fall; "the comparison is pretty poor, for in the Bible it was a man who was rescued half dead because he had fallen among thieves. I only had to walk along a verandah and fetch a towel and some water. Are you going to faint again, do you think?" he ended suddenly.

She shook her head slowly.

"No," she said in a low voice. "I shall be better in a minute—much better."

He pushed forward a chair, and she sat down gratefully. Leaning her head on her hands she sat motionless, her brown hair tumbling down her back, her kimono gracefully draping her slim figure. Kerr watched her without a word.

It was the clock on his mantelpiece which aroused them both. After a loud preliminary whirr it suddenly struck one o'clock. The lady opened her eyes and looked up inquiringly.

"One o'clock," said Peter Kerr.

"What, one o'clock?" she echoed quickly. She gathered the folds of her Japanese dressing-gown about her as if she would go.

"Perhaps," he began tentatively, "I had better fix that bandage for the night. I have some rather good stuff for cuts. A little would do a world of good, and help the healing. Shall I get it?"

He watched her as she felt her head with a little grimace of pain.

"Will it hurt?" she inquired, smiling at him with her hands still up to her head. The bandage made a sort of coif oddly becoming to her, he thought.

"Hurt! Certainly not," he responded, with unmistakable decision. "It's only ointment, you know. It will draw the

skin together, and in two or three days it should be all well. May I?"

He did not wait for an answer, but picking up the lamp, walked with it to his bedroom. He set it down on a table near the door and began rummaging.

The ointment was hard to find, it appeared; for when he had finally traced it to its hiding-place, the lady stood framed in the doorway.

"You left the other room almost dark," she explained a little reproachfully as he looked up.

"I have only just found it," said Kerr, producing a little jar, and turning to her. As she stood there, half in shadow, with one slim hand carefully holding the white bandage in place and her kimono hanging in loose folds about her, she might have been the model for a mediæval martyr.

"Now, if you please," he continued in businesslike tones, beginning to tear up a handkerchief.

She slipped the knotted band over her head and cautiously attempted to take away the little wetted pad he had placed underneath. But the blood had clotted, and the pad was now securely stuck. She gave a little whimper of dismay.

"Come to this basin," he said authoritatively, "and we will easily get it off with the aid of a sponge."

But the operation necessitated his coming so close to her that his hands suddenly became clumsy. The warmth and faint scent of her person added to his emotion, and it is to be feared that he took a wholly unnecessary time to do what should have been done in a moment.

The pallor had fled from her cheeks by the time he had finished, and something in his manner made her only look at him furtively.

"That will do, I think," she said a little abruptly, the very moment he had the new bandage in place. "Thank you very much."

She moved off without looking at him again; and the last he saw of her was her retreating form slowly going along the verandah, her way lighted by the lamp he held aloft.

CHAPTER VI

"Il faut rire avant que d'être heureux de peur de mourir sans avoir ri."—LA BRUYÈRE.

MEANWHILE, in England, so far off from the scenes which have just been chronicled, life marched seriously and sedately, in growing ignorance of the portentous stew being slowly prepared in the vast cauldron of the Orient. Not even the rough outlines of the problem were now grasped: China had relapsed into being merely a distant country full of yellow men, eternally squabbling, and thereby inviting disaster. It is undoubtedly difficult to get and keep the right angle of view at such a long range; and so, after providing food for thought and discussion during several whole weeks, it was only natural that such distressful politics, with their kaleidoscopic changes, should be relegated to a very subordinate place. China having been forced to agree, in the final form of treaties, to the various demands of the Powers, and a definite epoch having been thus brought to a close, it was undoubtedly too much to expect continued attention on the part of people only distantly concerned with such an obscure region.

Even to those in England who had a financial stake, the anti-climax brought about by China's complete collapse over the question of the territorial leases was disheartening, and all began shrugging their shoulders in open disgust. Alone Sir James Barker remained as keen as ever. He at least understood that the financial possibilities remained just as great, no matter what the political outlook might be. Apprised by cable of what was being done in a dozen different directions, he soon guessed that Peter Kerr was meeting more than his match. Yet even he, who understood so much, little suspected that Peter Kerr was rather like a

fly exploring a spider's web, and therefore destined to meet the fly's historic fate—unless he drew back in time.

The big banker, however, no matter what he might privately think, was always careful, when he communicated the news from China to his associates, to give only bald facts without any of the enlightening explanations he was really capable of making. He had good reason for his reserved attitude. For at one and the same time that he was doing everything in his power to forward this particular scheme of Peter Kerr's, he was not omitting to take other steps to protect his interests by certain methods familiar to the world of higher finance—a world, be it remarked, in which the vital question of pounds sterling mightily overshadows everything else.

To state things plainly, Barker was securing that he would be able to participate in all China railway concessions which might be placed on the European markets, no matter by whom they might be fathered or by whom negotiated; and by this step he was virtually securing himself against any direct loss. His financial position being far superior to that of his rivals of the Oriental Corporation, who were attempting a piecemeal scheme of their own in China, he was able to learn privately exactly what they were doing, and how they were now striving hard to convince the authorities that support should be given them unconditionally in view of the fact that they were the proper guardians of English interests in that particular field. In this, Barker admitted, there was nothing very novel, since in finance, as in politics, spheres of influence have long been accepted as a very natural modern development. Still, there were certain special circumstances in this particular instance which he could not forget, and which made him feel that he was morally justified in doing anything he deemed advisable to secure his own success.

Sir James Barker received almost daily reports of all these intrigues and manœuvres; and whenever he met his London rivals he smiled grimly to himself. He had many surprises

in his pockets, he thought, and he would take them out slowly one by one. Whilst he frankly confessed that the shifting politics and the Machiavellian intrigues of the Far East were beyond him, he was equally firm in his conviction that the money market could not jump away from under his feet; and therefore, as he was in a commanding position at the commanding part of the world—which is the centre, or the hub—he had the strong man's belief that fortune could hardly be unkind to him.

Yet at the same time that this was so he knew what very few other men in London knew: and this was what seriously disconcerted him. Briefly, he possessed certain information which would possibly have thrown his English rivals into his arms had they suspected its nature. It was familiar to every one, of course, that large continental interests were working strenuously in China to gain concessions of every kind; but few suspected that no less than four European governments were now virtually joining forces, thanks to a secret understanding arranged in Brussels, and were actually spending money with the greatest possible freedom in China so as to secure their own ends. Sir James Barker had received a categorical account of the vast plans which centred round the Belgian monarch, who saw in Chinese railways not only a handsome investment but a means towards acquiring political power which might materially influence world-politics. The confidential agent who had furnished Sir James Barker with the report in which he laid bare these far-reaching ideas had concluded his detailed statement by affirming that picked men who had been exploiting the immense Congo domains in the interest of their royal master were soon to be placed in charge of the China railway campaign. At a private conference already held, it had been dramatically announced to the bankers there assembled that "the king, our master, states that whoever controls the railways of China will control the future of that country. He therefore solicits your sincere co-operation and prompt action." It was not yet certain how far these curious

intrigues had actually gone; but there was reason to suspect that in a very few months it would be too late to combat them. In other words, unless something unforeseen happened, the entire China field would be surrendered to the exploitation of continental financiers, and not a single important line of railway could be secured by others.

Barker in these circumstances had long hesitated regarding what he should do. He seriously wondered for a long time whether it would not be really safer to join forces with his London rivals before it was too late. Should he himself make the first overtures? In the end, however, he dissuaded himself from acting on this idea, because he knew that to do so would be to bind himself hand and foot and to lose completely that liberty of action—that independence—which he always so highly esteemed. For in return for the support which the British government undoubtedly would give to a combined London group, explicit obedience to official suggestions would be demanded, and thereby all possibility of large and daring plans being consummated would be destroyed. For, considering the manner in which the Port Arthur incident had been handled, it was certain that the British government would not risk offending political rivals by demanding any really comprehensive railway concession in China.

Sir James Barker was one of a few men who believed that private enterprise was being already much too much hampered by paternal methods, which tended to destroy all boldness in private initiative and thus to yield the field to more enterprising rivals. He thus had no wish to secure government support. At the close of the nineteenth century, in his opinion, it should be no more necessary for the government to stage-manage concessions in Asia than, for instance, in South America or South Africa, where, if such a thing were attempted, there would be an instant outcry among the great finance houses, who had always relied entirely on their own endeavours and who did not indeed understand such pettifogging politics. In a word, Barker, not being saturated

with India and China traditions—in fact, knowing practically nothing about them—did not understand why there should be such constant solicitude about government support. Every one talked to him about it as if it were a *sine qua non.* Yet it seemed to him quite wrong that such subservience should exist, since governments, from their very nature, cannot have the courage of private enterprise and undoubtedly seek, above all things, to avoid trouble and international difficulties. The more Sir James Barker thought over the matter the more perplexed did he become; it seemed to him the most involved problem he had ever been called upon to handle.

One Sunday afternoon, full of such ideas, and having nothing to do, he did a rather strange thing—he decided to call on Phyllis May. He knew that he would find the Mays at home if he went sufficiently early; and on arriving at their house he was greatly relieved to find his surmise correct. Phyllis May was already in the drawing-room, waiting for him, when he entered the room, and going up to her quickly he expressed his pleasure at catching her in.

"How good of you to come," she said in her fresh, frank voice as she shook hands. "I was doing what somebody says a gentleman never does—I was looking out of the window when I saw you drive up. Otherwise you might have missed me, for I was about to go out, and was looking to see if the carriage had come. But I really haven't got anything special to do, so don't think you are keeping me in."

She laughed a little after this rather involved speech and sat down, wondering why he had called. She was quite sure, as she studied Sir James Barker's grave face, that he had some special object, and somehow she felt equally sure that the object must be in some way connected with Peter Kerr.

"We have not seen each other for such a very long time that I feel I should begin by apologizing," remarked Sir James Barker courteously, purposely leading the conversation aside for a moment to give himself time to think what he should say.

Phyllis murmured something vague in reply. She wondered now whether she had been mistaken in her first idea.

"Let me see," went on Sir James Barker ponderously, "I think I have seen you only twice since our friend Kerr gave us the slip. Yes—just twice. How time flies!"

He paused, as if that trite remark required some digesting, though he was really secretly wondering whether Phyllis was going to leave everything to him.

Well, she was. Since it was about Peter Kerr after all, it was Sir James Barker's business to do the talking; and this her manner most clearly showed.

"Time certainly does fly," she remarked, agreeing with his last reflection cheerfully and ignoring the rest. "And yet, since that is really the case, why should we often feel so savagely about Time that we must think up means to kill it? It is illogical, is it not? The poor thing is running away as fast as it can, and still that is not enough for us. We express the wicked wish to catch up and kill it—at regular intervals!"

Sir James Barker laughed at this speech. The idea she suggested was certainly quaint; Phyllis always said something novel, he had remarked to himself before.

"All the same, I don't think it's really illogical," he replied, arguing for the sake of gaining time and thus seeing whether she had purposely chosen such a neutral subject. "It is our blind egotism which makes us inevitably take the purely subjective point of view—the one derived from our own consciousness—when the only proper point of view from which properly to regard such a matter as time is the objective—that is, the external, the actual point of view, quite apart from the sensations and the emotions."

Phyllis put her hands to her ears in mock terror, though she was secretly relieved at the turn the conversation had taken.

"You are talking above my head," she said. "I am not wise enough to understand anything save purely from the point of view of the sensations and the emotions. What you maintain may be philosophical, but it is hardly human.

For how can one judge of a matter which affects life so intimately as time does if one excludes those essentials from consideration?"

Sir James Barker laughed good-humouredly and refused to go.

"If I have been talking above your head," he said, with an attempt at jocularity, "then you are talking beyond my reach. Which is the worst? I ought to have known that it would be useless," he concluded. "What a man you would have made!"

He looked at her with more admiration than he generally bestowed on the opposite sex.

"I make a man!" returned Phyllis as if she were protesting, though she was secretly flattered. "Never—I might have made a lawyer, but never a real man."

"What is the difference?" inquired Sir James Barker, looking amused once more.

"The difference," replied Phyllis, "is immense. All women are lawyers by instinct—they can split hairs but they cannot split heads. That is one point—I have dozens of others hidden away somewhere. And you will remember that there is the historic case of Portia to quote. What more do you want?"

It was Sir James Barker's turn to put up his hands.

"You have grown up so rapidly during the past couple of years," he said genially, "that I have not been able to follow your progress. You have left me miles behind: I can no longer argue with you. Why have you done it so suddenly?"

Phyllis shrugged her shoulders and gave a sigh.

"Alas!" she said. "The result is not so very astonishing when you come to think of it—excepting to mothers. One has to grow up, I suppose, and there is no reason why some should not do it rather hastily and some rather slowly."

Suddenly she looked at the banker with an amused expression, and determined to carry the war into the enemy's camp.

"I don't believe, Sir James," she continued, "that you were

ever much of a boy yourself; so why should you be so astonished at me? At sixteen you most certainly were a full-fledged banker investing every one's savings in three- or four-per-cents and shaking your head dismally at the crop outlook when you should have been playing football. Is that a picture true or not?"

Sir James Barker laughed indulgently. As he did so, he made up his mind that he would have to broach the subject he had in mind with absolute directness. So, since that was the case, he began by looking at his watch.

"Why, it is half-past four already," he exclaimed. "I hope I am not keeping you. I must be going. We have been talking for ever so many minutes about nothing."

He paused with his watch out as if he could not believe it, and then made as if he were going to get up. On the mantelpiece a solemn gong-beat gave confirmation to the hour.

Phyllis put out a hand as if to detain him. She had suddenly become not so certain that there had been any particular object.

"It *is* half-past four," she said a little unnecessarily, "but I am really not in any hurry. Do you hear anything from China?" Well—there, at last she had done it.

"How curious!" exclaimed Sir James Barker in answer to her question, suddenly looking immensely relieved. "That's just what I was going to ask you."

Phyllis smiled faintly.

"Great minds——" she began, scanning his features.

"Of course I hear all the time from Kerr by telegraph," said Barker, "but somehow I am not quite satisfied that all is going well, or going to go well. I cannot exactly tell you why it is, but that is what I feel. You know how these things come about, though no one can explain them. There has not been time to hear by mail, but somehow I read in his telegrams that Kerr doesn't seem to have the go, the push, the confidence, I expected. Frankly, I am feeling disappointed."

Sir James Barker paused, pulling at his chin in a characteristic action. He was looking into the distance as he spoke; had he observed Phyllis, he would have perhaps been surprised at the curious medley of emotions which passed across her face. But he was full of his own thoughts; for his words had brought uppermost to his mind the anxiety with which he was filled. Suddenly he decided to speak frankly.

"I want you, Miss May," he said, looking at her squarely, "to write to Kerr, if you will, and to write to him in the way women can do so much better than men. In a far-off place a letter is a good tonic—especially from a woman." He paused, and then went on. "Don't feel surprised at me; I am really very much in earnest. I remember many years ago in South America how letters helped matters considerably for me. You know the saying, 'As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.' It is a very good thing for a man to have letters."

He paused yet again, feeling that he had been clumsy, and glanced somewhat embarrassedly at the girl. He had no definite idea how she felt towards Peter Kerr, and he was more than a trifle alarmed. He suddenly remembered that somebody had told him that Kerr had not fulfilled certain expectations. Had he made a serious mistake?

"I hope you agree with me," he said anxiously. "I hope, in fact, there is no reason why you should not agree with me. If there is, please forget that I ever spoke."

"There is no reason why I should not write," said Phyllis in a reserved manner which he did not understand, "and if it will assist you in any way I will most certainly do so."

Sir James Barker thanked her profusely once again when he got up to go. He was a little puzzled at it all, he confessed to himself, but he was also immensely relieved. At the same time he made up his mind to make some inquiries—to find out how things were. Perhaps he should have consulted Mrs. May. He had never quite understood Peter Kerr's relations with Phyllis; nor had he ever found a valid

reason for the curious estrangement which had suddenly grown up between her and Mrs. John West, and which he had distinctly noticed one afternoon. He had half thought of going this very day to Mrs. John West on this same errand; now for some reason he was very glad he had chosen Phyllis.

Phyllis did not go out at once, as she had first proposed to do as soon as her visitor had left. She turned, and walking slowly across the room, once more gazed through the windows. This time, however, her eyes saw nothing of the busy world outside; they were roaming far, far away—seeking to understand a variety of things.

Yes, she would write. Perhaps she should have written sooner. Yet she did not exactly want to. Why should she write? Why had he only sent her the briefest line on the eve of his departure—why had he been so silent since?

A hundred questions tumbled over one another in her mind and found no answer. It was not until night had come that she commenced thinking about the motives which had prompted Sir James Barker to make such an odd request. Then somehow the idea took root that the banker had been purposely non-committal, so as not to show that it was merely a strategic move on his part to assist his own plans. That made Phyllis angry—she would write very little.

It was highly fortunate in more ways than one that Sir James Barker had not gone that day in search of consolation to Mrs. John West. For Mrs. John West was far away, sunning herself in Ostend, where the weather is always beautiful and it is pleasant to lounge in deep basket-chairs under red-striped umbrellas and gaze at the sea.

"How are things going in wonderful China?" she inquired of Colonel Maes, who happened to be there too, combining a little business with a good deal of pleasure.

"Slowly, very slowly," he confessed without embarrassment. "Our various rivals are much more formidable than we expected. On every side the Chinese are being tempted with

large sums of money. All Europe is entering the race, and some of our people are a little nervous. But that is because they do not know the personage who is behind us." Colonel Maes smiled with easy satisfaction.

"The only man I am really afraid of is Peter Kerr," said Mrs. John West reflectively, following her own train of thought. "He has brains and money and will certainly stop at nothing if he sees a chance of success. I am sure of that."

"Really," replied Colonel Maes, a little uneasily now. He felt there was truth in what she said. "What makes you still afraid of him?"

"I am anxious about my money, apart from anything else," rejoined Mrs. John West vaguely. "My husband will be furious if I lose such a lot."

"There is no danger of that, my dear madam," cried the Belgian quickly. "We have guarantees which are above suspicion." He remained silent a minute, busily thinking. Then he went on in a changed voice: "May I ask you frankly if you can think of any way of arresting your amiable countryman's activity? What sort of policy should we adopt on the spot to foil him—what sort of man is he?"

Mrs. John West suddenly laughed, and a curious expression came into her eyes.

"Whom have you in China?" she asked with simple directness. "Have you anybody nice-looking, for instance?"

Colonel Maes glanced at her sharply, and then suddenly clapped his hands in a purely continental way.

"It takes a woman to suggest things," he exclaimed in wicked glee. "We shall see what can be done." He picked up his stick and twirled it quickly between his thin hands, whilst his eyes surveyed the gay esplanade.

"What admirable ideas women have!" he finished a little ambiguously as some ladies in enormous hats slowly approached.

CHAPTER VII

"Il n'y a au monde que deux manières de s'élever: ou par sa propre industrie, ou par l'imbécillité des autres."—LA BRUYÈRE.

THE morning after his strange midnight adventure, Peter Kerr awoke late. For a few moments his mind remained a blank. Then, as he jumped up to make certain that the strange hour which his watch proclaimed was correct, his eye fell on the disorder which he had left untouched, and his heart gave a sudden leap. In the sober morning light the whole thing seemed a dream, a romance of the brain. Yet there were the telltale proofs that he had not been dreaming. He gazed around him in increasing wonderment and forgot all about the hour.

"Damn!" he swore gently to himself. The curious night-scene now rose clearly before his eyes and filled him with conflicting emotions. And as neither pondering nor gentle swearing brought any relief to him, suddenly he swung to his feet and rang for his *boy*.

A loud knock on the door came so quickly that he was sure it was not his servant.

"Come in," he called, rapidly throwing the things he had picked up into a corner.

As the door opened, he swallowed some angry words and forced his features into an unwilling smile.

He might have known it! It was no other person than Lorenzo, arrayed in spotless white flannels and looking aggressively cool and clean and collected. The straw hat on his head was adorned with a red ribbon carefully chosen to give the desired effect—it was a sort of crown of colour on a cloth of innocence—whilst his necktie was a clever blend between the two extremes. As usual, Lorenzo was smoking

a thick, black cigar, which he held with studied grace. To Kerr, just at that moment, there was something infinitely jarring in the man, because he was manifestly so sure of himself.

"Good-morning," said the Italian very deliberately, pausing on the threshold. "I hope I have not disturbed you."

He spoke politely enough, but there was a peculiar sardonic expression about his lips and eyes which said those things which he was good enough to leave unspoken. It was as if he were infinitely amused at having such a complete advantage over the man of whom he wished to ask a favour. Perhaps his fresh morning attire added to this impression; but no matter what it was, it was borne in on Kerr with distressing distinctness that his visitor had him at a distinct disadvantage.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," repeated Lorenzo, still standing on the door-sill and watching the other with an absolute assurance of manner. He knew that the Englishman would with pleasure have slammed the door in his face; but he also knew that one cannot very well do this to a person who is studiously polite, no matter how much one may wish to.

"Not at all," answered Peter Kerr after a pause, speaking rather roughly in spite of himself; "as you see, I was just going to take a bath. I was merely wondering whether I should postpone that happy event or ask you to wait until it was over. It was a question of two alternatives." He had it on the tip of his tongue to say "the lesser of two evils."

"I will not keep you long," replied the Italian, settling the question at once by advancing with the same deliberation into the room and closing the door carefully behind him. "Time flies," he continued, going to the sitting-room and drawing Kerr after him. "Time flies, my friend, and just now in this country there is no time to waste. Look at what happened here as recently as yesterday."

He flicked a paper he drew from his pocket carelessly across to Kerr, who had unwillingly seated himself at a

small table in the centre of the room. Peter Kerr rapidly read through its typewritten contents.

"What!" he exclaimed as soon as he had reached the end, "a sixteen-million loan signed yesterday?" He began to realize anew that he knew nothing of what was going on in this mysterious capital.

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes," he replied carelessly, "we all expected it. It had to come. It is the last payment China had to make as the result of one of the little follies she has so consistently committed. This is the final part of the indemnity of the Japanese war of a few years ago. We all expected it."

He looked thoughtfully into space, allowing sufficient time to pass for Kerr properly to assimilate the news he had brought him.

"But," he continued, "it was, all the same, rather neatly done. Not a soul knew about it until this morning, when it was too late for the usual diplomatic protests and threats." He laughed contemptuously and then went on: "Now if sixteen millions can be arranged for so easily, why not a larger sum for a purpose which is China's own benefit—railways? The only thing is—secrecy. If things leak out, there would be an end to everything at once."

"Why?" asked Peter Kerr. He was already interested, in spite of his disinclination to begin business at such an early hour. The Italian was one of those who, strangely enough, become interesting the moment they speak.

"Do you need to ask why?" he inquired. "It is because suspicion is in the air; because we are all very greedy and want to make money very badly; because we are all anxious to steal a march on our competitors and to be proclaimed great and clever. All this is in the air in Peking; it is mixed up with the dirty dust and the bad smells. It is the principal thought from morning to night; and, finally, it is the exact reason why I have been up and dressed these two hours waiting to see you."

He concluded this remarkable speech with an emphatic gesture, after which he put out his hand to take back his paper. The cynical indifference in his face had given place to an energy of expression which was surprising. Lorenzo at work, planning and building with deft hand and subtle insinuations, was a different man from Lorenzo the dilettante in wines and effeminate toilets; if he was like this in mere descriptive work, what must he not be when he was hot on his own schemes, fighting the fight against cunning rivals? It was a question well worth asking—and quickly deciding, thought Kerr.

So he threw the cigarette he had been smoking far out over the verandah, and brought his strong hands together with a sudden cracking of his finger-joints.

"Well," he said shortly, "I accept your offer of last night. I believe we had better lose no time. Propose your own terms."

Lorenzo made no immediate answer. He took off his hat in a leisurely manner and wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief in a characteristically easy and graceful gesture. He was very calm. Then he smiled with that Latin smile which lights up the whole face and can mean everything—or nothing.

"The devil!" he said. "It makes one hot to talk even at ten in the morning. Summer will soon be here and then we shall bake."

He carefully replaced his hat—this time in a somewhat debonair manner on the back of his head—and taking out a gold pencil-case, he adjusted it and began rapidly making calculations. He pondered frequently as he wrote figures and scratched them out, beginning each time more carefully. Finally he seemed to make up his mind, for, tearing a fresh sheet from the heavy note-book in which he was writing, he ruled it off roughly and filled in a number of calculations. The completed copy brought a smile of approbation to his face.

"That is about right, I think," he said with careful delibera-

tion as he passed it over to Peter Kerr. "You must let me have two thousand pounds at once."

Kerr rapidly ran through the totals and the staccato explanatory notes. They dealt in plain language with the manner in which these moneys would be expended at once. The manner was eminently practical and suited to the peculiar circumstances which had to be met.

Having already made up his mind, without a word Kerr got up and fetched a despatch-box. He filled in a cheque for the amount stipulated and handed it promptly over to Lorenzo. The Italian read it carefully, nodded his head, folded up the bit of paper with singular method and placed it in a pocketbook. Then he took his own little memorandum of expenses and wrote across the back of the paper in a flowing hand a full receipt for the sum.

"Now that we have got so far," he said, "let us get a little farther. I want all possible details and some sheets of foolscap. You must remember that I must have a rough general idea about your business. We can finish everything necessary this morning."

Whilst Kerr opened rolls of papers and plans, the Italian himself prepared for work. He took off his coat and drew from a pocket a large-scale map of China, which he unfolded and pinned to the table. Then, with the sheets of foolscap beside him, he began noting rapidly what was read to him. Soon the two men were so absorbed in their work that they lost all count of the time.

"I think I have got everything I want for the present. It is a question at the commencement of placing yourself entirely in my hands. You will get good treatment."

The Italian made the statement in his same deliberate manner, as he first gathered his foolscap together and then fixed his eyes with some satisfaction on the map. Marked out in thick strokes was the whole network of lines proposed by Kerr, a network which seemed to change the whole aspect of the country. "It will be the devil of a job," he con-

tinued, "but by aspiring to so much something must come of it. I begin to understand."

He leaned back, and extending his arms high above his head yawned ungracefully. Then he took out his watch.

"We have put in nearly two hours," he said, "and I have enough to go on with for a couple of weeks. You had better push on with the detailed plans so that when necessary we can file them. How long will it be before the first surveys are finished?"

"By hurrying, some may be finished in a month—some in two months. I shall telegraph this afternoon."

"Good," replied the Italian, thoughtfully tapping with his gold pencil on his scrawled notes. "We will be able to feed the Chinamen here in regular doses. That is the way to work with them—to excite their curiosity as well as their cupidity—and then to keep on feeding them with new details all the time."

He got up and reached for his coat.

"By the bye," he said with assumed carelessness, "I brought some documents to show you in case you needed persuading."

He took his heavy pocketbook once more and drew out some papers. Without unfolding them, he handed them across to Peter Kerr.

"Oh-ho!" said Kerr as he glanced at the signatures. "These are big people, even for London."

"Yes," said the Italian with sudden simplicity, "yes, but I am not their representative, you will notice if you read. I am only 'recommended' by them, a little in the same way that a coachman or a valet is recommended to strangers. This is because, though they are quite willing to profit by my success, they are unwilling to be identified with a mere concession-hunter until it pays them in spot cash to be so. Is it not a pretty world?"

The Italian's manner had changed again, and now he spoke with supreme and biting sarcasm. He seemed to resent the wording of these letters with the acute resentment of the man who knows that his brains and energy are held

in far higher esteem than his person—and who is convinced that this is both cowardly and unjust. For a moment this righteous indignation filled him to the exclusion of everything else: then, his mood having quickly spent itself, he suddenly shrugged his shoulders.

"Never mind," he said with a careless laugh, as with an air of finality he restored the papers to his inner pocket. "It is the successful man who counts to-day, and shortly I shall be successful—completely successful. To succeed in China one must possess one's self of a little piece of paper—that is, an Imperial Edict, and nothing more. Sometimes it contains only a few dozen words and no more; sometimes scarcely a dozen. That little piece of paper has to be pursued night and day until it flutters and falls within one's grasp. For how potent it is! It is a veritable talisman—it accomplishes everything. On top of it one can build the most extravagant schemes—nothing is impossible in China when the Emperor himself has spoken. That is why I am smiled on by grave financiers who are willing to be my architects once the foundations have been securely laid."

Lorenzo breathed deeply and leaned his elbows on the table. Then he looked satirically at Kerr.

"Perhaps you understand now why you found it impossible to make a start. Possibly you expected to find government offices here where public business is transacted much as in England. I cannot imagine what you expected. Perhaps you thought of the Legations. Well, they are very busy eating and drinking and carrying on diplomacy. The real business is done outside by men who accept conditions as they find them and care for nothing but success. Do you understand me? There are four men who have been responsible for all the vast schemes and counter-schemes which are beginning to upset and resettle the whole Far East. They are——"

A gust of rebellious wind, filled with choking dust, suddenly swept in from the verandah and blew round the room,

banging the windows to and bringing papers to the ground with a confusing rustling. With a rapid movement Lorenzo rescued his own sheets and left his sentence unfinished. Peter Kerr, having picked up what had fallen to the ground, looked up inquiringly for the end. But the Italian was now gazing reflectively out of the window.

"Well," said Kerr at length, "who are these men?" feeling that he had now the right to inquire.

The Italian laughed *piano, pianissimo,* and waved an arm towards the verandah.

"I have changed my mind," he said quite gravely. "I dare not tell you, at least not just now. Frankly, I am superstitious. That wind which wished to scatter our papers was an omen, a warning. It was what is still printed on the shipping documents of your steamship companies—'the act of God or the Queen's enemies.' We must be careful."

He nodded his head thoughtfully and became silent. Then he took his cigar-case from his pocket and offered it to the Englishman. Kerr, who was disappointed, shook his head, and Lorenzo, with a shrug of his shoulders, lighted a fresh cigar himself.

"I am sorry," he said carelessly, "that I cannot oblige you as I was going to do, but, as I told you, I am superstitious. If I told you now the names of the four men it would do us no good. You must trust to me—for the time being at least. Later we shall see."

He smiled engagingly and folded his remaining papers neatly into his pockets. Kerr also began packing up his despatch-box in silence.

"We have had enough business for this morning," said Lorenzo, watching him for a moment. "I think I will go out; it is a beautiful day, though warm."

He gazed out of the windows in the same indifferent way, and then walked in his leisurely manner on to the verandah.

"A beautiful day," he resumed, suddenly breaking off with a staccato exclamation in Italian. Kerr shot a glance at

him—and then went on deliberately packing up his papers. Lorenzo was gazing fixedly down the verandah in the direction Peter Kerr had gone the night before.

Lorenzo stood there for several minutes without saying a word, apparently absorbed in the prospect, and then suddenly faced round and came back into the room. Peter Kerr, had he looked up, would have found that his mobile features had now yet another expression. There was a curious coarseness on his face hard to describe.

"I had no idea you had such an appetizing neighbour," he began tentatively.

Peter Kerr looked up with a blankness of expression which was so well feigned that even the astute Italian was deceived. Lorenzo was really astonished.

"What!" he exclaimed, "you have not taken the trouble to notice who occupies the end rooms? It is Madame Boisragon, the wife of that Frenchman who is never seen. Yesterday I told you about them. To-day I understand why he hides her—especially when he is away."

"Is he away?"

The question fell from Peter Kerr's lips involuntarily, and almost immediately Lorenzo broke into high-pitched laughter. He appeared to enjoy the joke, for he did not reply at once.

"Excuse me," he said at length, still apparently struggling with his feelings, "but I am easily amused with certain things. That remark of yours was characteristic: English caution must always be satisfied before English interest can be aroused! It is beautiful. I have often thought that the real English Romeo would secure that Juliet's father and mother were out at a dinner-party and the nurse drunk in the kitchen before venturing under any window—let alone going farther! Is that not true?"

To the Italian's surprise, instead of being offended at this caustic description of British limitations, Peter Kerr laughed so heartily that Lorenzo, with his quick mind always on the alert for surprises and mysteries, suddenly looked at him

suspiciously. The Englishman laughed too long, it seemed to him; only very foolish people laughed like that—without any special reason. Now this man was no fool——

"Perhaps I have been indiscreet," Lorenzo began in his old sardonic tones, buttoning his coat and fixing his hat on his head with the peculiar tilt he affected. He was not quite sure now that he had had the best of this bout.

"The English have their peculiarities like everybody," replied Kerr indifferently. "It does them good to hear about them."

Lorenzo stood for a moment wrapt in thought.

"Enough for this morning," he said abruptly, holding out his hand. "I will see you later. That man Boisragon is after railways too, and is rather clever." And with that parting shot he left Peter Kerr to his own devices.

Kerr himself sat most of the day writing and working. By late afternoon he had completed and despatched a sheath of telegrams and arranged a new mass of notes. Then, as the shadows came, tired yet a little elated he sat for a long while looking over the verandah on to the street, motionless and wondering what the future would bring. In the fading daylight this indeed seemed a land of contradictions and half-effects.

Ten thousand miles away, Sir James Barker sat the very same day with Kerr's decoded message in his hand—for the difference in time allows of the anomaly that a telegram despatched from Far East to Far West should arrive *before* the hour it is despatched. Sir James Barker compared this telegram with some news he had just received from Brussels, and then smiled complacently. Like a spider in the centre of a web, he could estimate with some exactitude the fate of those who were buzzing noisily far away on the outer rim. He had set everything in motion he could think of. Brussels was now offering to place him confidentially among the underwriters of a three-hundred-million-franc Chinese railway loan which Belgian agents believed they would

secure before the end of the year. As he had not heard lately from Jerkins and New York, Barker rapidly summarized the news he had received and ordered it to be telegraphed at once to America. Then he sent out to inquire what general market news there might be regarding the Far East.

He learnt with surprise that the feeling of the day—that remarkable market-feeling which quicker than anything else discloses all political possibilities and probabilities—was distinctly uneasy.

It was almost becoming oddly complicated in China, it was said. The City was full of Chinese rumours for no particular reason. In the Far East the pace was said to be perceptibly quickening—great things were in the making. Yet no one had any very definite news; no one knew exactly what it meant. There were just rumours, vague and curious rumours, which, like the vapours of early morning, would either be dissipated by the rising sun, or might thicken to stormy weather.

CHAPTER VIII

"On n'imagine pas combien il faut d'esprit pour n'être pas ridicule."—CHAMFORT.

As the guests trooped into the great Legation dining-room in strictly ordered precedence, their somewhat severe diplomatic air began gradually to melt and give place to refreshingly natural laughter and conversation. Possibly the sprinkling of strangers among them that evening contributed materially to this happy result. Strangers in a much-bored assembly generally have a good effect; to borrow a simile from the modern dairy, they seem to act the part of separators—that is, they separate the cream from the milk. Of course bright people, like cream, always rise to the top; and yet if they are left undisturbed—that is, unseparated from that which must inevitably turn bad—they will become sour too. Therefore the office performed by strangers is a very important one.

At the start it had been immensely boring, as it always must be where a select list of exiles meet at too frequent intervals and attempt to forget themselves in perfunctory pleasure. Brillat-Savarin, who knew something about the physiology of taste, once wrote: "To invite any one as a guest is to be responsible for his happiness all the time that he is under your roof." But Brillat-Savarin lived in the gayest country in the world: he had never suffered exile in a very small community. To make your neighbour feel pleased with himself—to make yourself responsible for his happiness—when you have possibly been employed up to a very few minutes before the dinner-hour in forestalling his most cherished scheme, is more than difficult. Only very exceptionable people like Talleyrand can congratulate a person they feel like strangling! Generally, of course, diplo-

macy is largely a game—a sort of unending posturing and cajoling in the interests of your particular fatherland, so that its point of view may be cordially endorsed and applauded just because it is made to appear so very reasonable. It is, or should be, gastronomical art—plus a top hat, a frock coat, and a pleasant wife, leaving the clever telegraph-wires to do the rest.

But in the almost forgotten times of which we write, things had been moving too rapidly and in too serious a manner for this traditional attitude to be properly observed. There had been much feeling and passion. Men, even though they may have then only dimly realized how great were the stakes, had become honestly absorbed in the curious game proceeding under their very eyes. After years of routine intriguing, such as always goes on in every typical Oriental capital, a wonderful period of open scramble had set in forecasting a sensational change in political geography. No wonder that the donning of dinner-clothes did nothing to change thoughts and ambitions. It might have done so, had there been any youth. But in diplomacy, properly speaking, there is outwardly no youth—it is all grey hairs, or at least grey looks and grey thoughts, which is much the same thing.

Now, however, because of the number of strangers present, an unwonted and strange gaiety gradually invaded the handsome dining-room—a gaiety which caused some of the older men to turn their heads in wonder, as if they could hardly believe such good spirits possible. Yet the splendid Chinese ceiling, full of rich colouring arranged in quaint mathematical designs of Turkish or Persian origin, was made to look down on gay and festive gatherings. Once upon a time Manchu princes and princesses, clothed in gorgeous robes, must have gathered here and banqueted in royal style, for this had been a ducal palace in the days before the coming of the white-skinned foreigner and had only been acquired by force of arms. The great folding-doors, leading into the room from each side, were latticed so as to

match the Eastern effect given by the ceiling; massive pillars of *sang-de-bœuf* had been introduced where the room had been lengthened, and lent additional attraction to the general colour-scheme; whilst the servants in their brilliant official clothing and tasselled hats completed a background which was as picturesque as it was unusual.

Yet most people in the room saw nothing of all this, in spite of their gaiety. They talked of this country and everything in it mainly as if it were bric-à-brac, which would be finally disposed of to the highest bidder—that is, to the bidder who would be the boldest. The medley of voices, now rising louder and louder, might have been the voices of buyers and sellers calling their terms and anxious only to complete a bargain. It was doubtless right and proper—and very logical—that this should be so; for had not even mediæval China only served as a useful name for porcelain?

The French windows of this stately dining-room opened on to a broad and silent courtyard, which was adorned with a pair of immense Chinese stone lions. Every one instinctively loved those lions—at first sight. They did not resemble so much the noble king of animals as he is pictured in his wild haunts, as a fantastic and peculiar Chinese pug-dog type, which certainly would not harm either friend or enemy. Each dignified animal sat there squatting on its haunches, one holding in a clumsy paw the male symbol, the other the female. Mounted on great blocks of stone, they lent a princely air to the avenue over which they endlessly watched. Scattered here and there in the courtyard, and swinging on tridents of bamboo, were great mediæval-looking lanterns of oil-paper belonging to those who had lighted the way for the numerous chair-bearers and carters. These gauze-like globes, though they only contained an ordinary candle, were so big that two men could hardly encircle one with their arms; and yet the light they shed only served to illumine a little patch of ground, leaving shadows and darkness between them. On each was painted in great square characters, oddly flattened down so as to allow room

for such long descriptions, the full name, titles, and residence of the master. Among these lanterns numberless chair-coolies were squatting in untidy groups, smoking little pipes which they were continually knocking out on the ground with a sharp clicking, whilst they conversed in peculiarly cavernous undertones. Near the gate-house were the chairs and the carts and the mules and the outriders' ponies, mixed in close company with other bands of people who were idly watching them, or peacefully sleeping in every possible and impossible attitude. Everything was prepared in the courtyard so as to wait indefinitely on the pleasure of the masters and mistresses within. It might last three hours, or five hours, or seven hours—who knew or cared?

Perhaps it was the peculiar novelty of these things which had made the strangers, after an initial pause, bubble with such irrepressible gaiety. They could get occasional glimpses through the open windows of the picturesque massing of this passive and novel serving-world scattered among the dim globes of oil-paper, and the sight filled them with a desire for information on many subjects. And since any one may impart with safety to strangers all sorts of strangely inaccurate things, quite a number of generally silent people were listening in some admiration to their own voices and explaining this and that, with remarkable fluency. Not even the sombre and preoccupied air of the host, who answered everything in abrupt monosyllables, or the whole-hearted energy with which the hostess was devoting herself to her own dinner, could keep down the rising tide. People wanted to talk a great deal—they would talk—and so the voices of the bright and the dull rose and fell in questions and answers.

"You are not at the hotel?" asked a sallow-faced man, who had been observing all this animation with an air of amused sarcasm, speaking to the lady he had taken in to dinner.

"Oh, dear, no," she answered with a laugh. "I was saved

from that by a kind friend. They tell me the hotel is a rather remarkable place."

The sallow-faced man smiled enigmatically, and stroked his wispy moustache, as he considered the question. It was hard to know what his thoughts really were, for he was one of those who keep their thoughts hidden. Also he was peculiarly deliberate—an attitude which is inevitably disconcerting and does not make for geniality.

"Remarkable, no—that is not the word," he said at length. "But the proprietor Carnot is rather remarkable. He has marvellous power over Chinese. And not only is Carnot remarkable, but he also has remarkable guests. Therefore it would be more correct to say that the contents of the hotel is remarkable. In some respects it is pure opera bouffe. They—the contents, I mean—are mostly looking for concessions, but some are looking for other things."

"Oh!" exclaimed the lady.

His partner showed such interest in this exclamation that the sallow-faced man smiled in triumph to himself. He was always setting traps like this—for people of a certain sort.

"Some," he explained, setting his thin lips together, "are looking for quiet."

"Oh!" said the lady again.

She was what he called very English, which covered a multitude of failings and prejudices. A doubtful expression having come over her face, showing that she did not desire his confidences, the sallow-faced man became more pleased than ever.

"Well, we shall see them all to-night," he continued easily, as if his companion had actually asked for more. "We shall see the concession-hunters and the others. They are a curious band. If you like I will classify for you in advance: I am rather good at that, and then you will be able to recognize them."

The lady murmured something unintelligible. But the sal-

low-faced man, perhaps owing to the curious gaiety in the air, had become irrepressible. Most people hated him, because he could really be very bitter. To revenge themselves, they said that he was a brute who beat his wife.

"Perhaps you can tell me, since you are English," he began again. "You must remember I am only a foreigner and I want to know. Do men in England often take the name of Smith"—he dwelt on the word with disagreeable emphasis —"for any particular object when they go abroad? There is a gentleman called Smith"—once more he paused—"at the hotel who goes riding every day, and beside him runs a lady whose name I do not know, but who wears short skirts and has short curls. It is very interesting for this place, and we all want to know why he should be named Smith."

The sallow-faced man's partner was divided between annoyance and a desire to laugh. She did not like the peculiar tone of this man, and, not understanding his motives, she was ill at ease. Yet the way he described things was amusing. After a moment's thought, she decided to smile vaguely. A smile is a woman's securest fortress.

"I suppose it is just possible," she said, "that his name is Smith. Why are you so interested?"

A lull in the general conversation occurred at this very moment; and, as so often happens, these last words fell on the ears of half a dozen listeners.

"How curious," said a man sitting two or three places from her, leaning quickly forward. "There is some one who really knows. I knew I was right—his name *is* Smith, you see."

The lady, who did not know the speaker, coloured with annoyance; she was now really angry with the sallow-faced man. Instead of apologizing or helping her, he turned and laughed in open delight.

"You realize what you have done," he gasped in the midst of his laughter. "You have testified to your countryman's *bona fides;* you will now be quoted as the authority. If it

turns out later that Mr. Smith is somebody else you will be blamed."

The sallow-faced man laughed in a crackly voice for a long time. He was genuinely delighted. It was seldom his methods were so signally rewarded.

The lady's indignant reply was drowned in the noise made by a loud-voiced military *attaché* who was trying to make himself amiable after the foreign fashion by drinking the health of his hostess across the table.

"Madame, madame, votre santé," he was saying at regular intervals with his glass upraised. For a long time, though he raised his voice more and more until it attracted general attention, his hostess, who was short-sighted and had her nose almost on her plate, did not hear him.

"She is terribly short-sighted," whispered some one to an elderly man next to him.

"That does not explain her deafness or her appetite," rudely rejoined his companion, who did not love her. Then they began discussing the matter *sotto voce* in French.

"Vous savez, pour moi," confided the elderly man, speaking with a strong German accent, *"c'est absolument comme les cochons mangent, c'est à dire avec le nez dans le plat. Vous direz, peut-être que c'est malhonnête de ma part, mais avouez que c'est la vérité."*

A neighbour who was a little deaf overheard part of this and had to have it all repeated twice for his benefit before he understood. When he finally grasped it, he went into fits of half-suppressed laughter.

"Un cochon—c'est bon, c'est bon," he repeated in mutilated French, looking with intense amusement across the table.

The loud-voiced military *attaché* had at last succeeded in his object, by stopping all general conversation; and his hostess, who appeared to be in a vile temper, hardly acknowledged his amiable advances with more than a brief nod. Having temporarily satisfied her appetite, she was now casting furious glances at the Chinese servants, who

were becoming more and more noisy; and rattling her knife and fork against her plate, she attempted to coerce them into better manners. But they had been left uncontrolled too long; and after the manner of their kind, they would now make a great noise until the very end.

"It is abominably gay and noisy to-night for Peking," ventured somebody else.

"Yes," replied his neighbour, "we are not only thirty-six at dinner, but more than one hundred people are coming in afterwards. One hundred—think of it. It is an invasion!"

"What is there going to be—dancing?"

"I suppose so—and gossiping. It is so warm now that one can at least escape into the garden."

"And breathe the delicious Peking dust," interrupted the other man with a sarcastic laugh.

"Well," rejoined the other, continuing his own train of thought, "I have had enough of this much-vaunted Peking. Frankly, it is too historic for me."

"Still it is interesting—marvellously interesting at the present moment on the political side."

There was a moment of silence, whilst the first speaker eyed his companion a little suspiciously.

"I suppose you are very busy just now," he ventured cautiously at last.

"Oh, yes, but not very much more than usual," answered the other indifferently. "What I want to know is whether there will not be internal complications. Will there be a revolution, or a *coup d'état,* or something exciting like that? It can't go on like this forever."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we are all insisting so much that presently there will come a point when there is nothing more to take. We will have soon eaten all the cake, and you know what happens when one does that."

He folded his arms across his stomach and made a grimace.

His companion gave such a loud laugh at this unembarrassed pantomime, that the black-browed host looked up

frowningly, as if he suspected they had been making fun of him.

"Don't be alarmed about that just yet," he replied. "Besides, *we* have been eating the cake. The aches and pains will be ours. And then, again, we are only at the commencement, and there is going to be lots more of this sort of thing. I have never believed in China, and I believe less to-day than I have ever believed before."

At the other end of the table things were proceeding very gaily.

"Monsieur de Boyar, Monsieur de Boyar," called a lady with a fantastic aigrette to a thin man with two big decorations which seemed to weigh him down.

"Countess," he replied immediately.

"We want you to explain why the Peking streets are so beautifully lighted."

"Why?" he riposted tragically, dropping his knife and fork and crossing his arms. "It is doubtless owing to exactly the same reasons which cause the sun to shine—that is, because the Emperor desires it."

He had told the story fifty times already; but everybody was willing to enjoy it just as much on this fifty-first occasion.

"The Emperor," he began, "heard with displeasure that the Peking streets were very dark and dangerous at night. So one day he seized his Vermilion Pencil and wrote, 'Let one million taels be spent on lighting the streets. Tremble and obey.'

"The edict was duly handed to the Grand Council. The Grand Councillors deliberated that very day in the Palace on this measure and forthwith issued instructions to the Captain-General of the Nine Gates. 'The Emperor,' they said, 'out of the generosity of his heart has decreed that five hundred thousand taels be spent at once on the lighting of the streets. Let this be obeyed.'

"It was the duty of the Captain-General of the Nine Gates to draft instructions to the Prefect of the city. He wrote:

" 'It has been decreed by the Emperor that three hundred thousand taels be spent on the lighting of the streets. Instruct your subordinates accordingly.'

"The Prefect of the city called the district Magistrates together and explained to them what they had to do.

" 'You have one hundred thousand taels,' he said, 'to spend on the lighting of the streets. See that the Wards carry out this noble measure at once.'

"The Magistrates bowed and withdrew and sent orders to the Wards.

" 'Five thousand taels,' they said, 'is to be spent on this good work. Attend to it at once.'

"The headmen of the Wards likewise soon acted. For them it was very simple. Without delay every householder was ordered under pain of summary punishment to display a light outside his house between the hours of sunset and sunrise. So grumblingly the householders bought very small oil-lamps, and put them up, wondering why this expense should be thrown on them. And in this way the city was beautifully lighted.

"Now the beggars of Peking were much disturbed at this startling development. Nothing like it had been seen before. The beggars' guilds met and discussed the matter very solemnly. 'How comes it,' they inquired, 'that all this good bean-oil is being consumed for such a useless purpose?' And as no one could find a satisfactory answer they too decided on action.

"That night the ten thousand hungry beggars of Peking assembled at their stations, and without haste or flurry methodically extinguished the little lamps, and eagerly *drank* the beautiful warm bean-oil! It had a sweet taste. The householders the next day refused to find more oil. As the incident was considered closed nobody paid any more attention to the matter; and this is the historic reason why Peking, as the Countess says, is so beautifully lighted today."

"Bravo, bravo!" every one near him called, much amused.

"Now that is what I call a good story," said one of the strangers. "I shall certainly write it down immediately I get home to-night."

A pretty but rather faded girl turned round in her chair and looked out of the open windows as the curious clatter-rattle of Peking cart-wheels was wafted in.

"People are beginning to arrive already," she explained to a very young man next to her.

"Indeed," he said with a supercilious air, "they are more lucky than we are."

"How so?" she inquired, trying to make herself amiable.

The supercilious youth gave a thin laugh.

"Need you ask?" he said. "We have taken nearly two hours already—two mortal hours. And not only that, but because there are so many important people present, we are miles away from the host and hostess, and therefore we get bad champagne and worse claret."

"How can you tell?"

The youth laughed a second time. "I will tell you, but do not say it was me. In this house, when there are a lot of people, below First Secretaries they always give cheap wines. Think of it! It is a nice sort of hospitality. To-night I am sure of it, for I have looked at the labels."

The youth nodded familiarly far down the table to an iron-jawed man and made a wry face as he lifted his champagne-glass to his lips. The iron-jawed man allowed a discreet smile to steal over his features. The youth, being rich, was encouraged by his chief in all his little ways.

"You see he understands," explained the *attaché* to the girl after this little pantomime. "You see what one has to suffer."

"I think you are rather rude, you know," she said in reply. "When you have eaten a man's salt——"

"Oh, I say," he protested, "but I am speaking of bad wine —it is undrinkable. What do you expect me to do? I am sure I shall be sick to-morrow, and I hate being sick."

A great drawing-back of chairs fortunately at last took

place. The hostess, having entirely satisfied her own wonderful appetite, had announced loudly that it was becoming late; and continental fashion the men were giving their arms to the ladies and escorting them out. Numbers of other people were already arriving, whilst the sounds of a band, blowing tentative notes on their instruments, added to the growing din which was soon wafted in to the house through the windows. Many more carts and chairs had arrived, with their attendants advertising each arrival by their uproar. At last this shouting and calling became so marked that some men who were smoking and drinking coffee and liqueurs on the verandah peered out.

"Either this is the *coup d'état* arriving in state," said a facetious person, "or it is Li Hung Chang! You will observe that it can only be one of two things. His servants always give the impression that a rebellion is in progress."

Amidst laughter all leaned their heads out to see. It was indeed no other person than the great Li Hung Chang. His large mounted escort rode right up through the spacious courtyard to the very front door, hustling every one else roughly aside in order that the supreme importance of their own master might be rightly understood.

Several of the younger men went back and told the ladies that they were going to have the pleasure of seeing the great Li Hung Chang. A French lady, totally unimpressed, gathered up her skirts in alarm.

"Mais il est dégoutant, ce vieux Li," she exclaimed volubly. *"Il crache partout! Moi je vais me sauver dès qu'il entre."*

She made as if she would really run off, so the others gathered round her protestingly. If she went they would all follow too. There was a buzz of protests and silly little cries, as some sought to restrain a general *sauve-qui-peut.*

Whilst they were still discussing this important question, a growing murmur came from the hall. Their host was escorting the great man with due ceremony from the very entrance of his house to the spot where he would sit the whole evening, smoking an immensely long pipe and calmly expec-

torating. Full preparation had fortunately been made for this strange performance; and as the far-famed Viceroy, who was reputed not only to wield more power than any other man in China, but to be fabulously rich as well, entered the room supported on either side by a solicitous retainer in full official clothes and buttoned hat, the host led him in a bee-line to a massive chair, half surrounded by Chinese flower-pots. There he would be safe—for the furniture.

The old man, seeming immensely tall for a Chinaman even though he was beginning to be bowed down by years, courteously inclined his head towards the assembled company again and again as he walked slowly forward. Though some of his habits were curious, he had the manner of the *grand seigneur*. He paused once to shake hands with his hostess, who, yielding to the peremptory nods of her husband, had come reluctantly forward; then he continued on his way, until he had seated himself with a sigh of relief on his great chair. He was simply clad in silks as a Chinese gentleman; there was nothing save his remarkable personality to show who he was. Two or three other servants, in full official dress, who had followed from afar, now came up and handed him his pipe with that peculiar trembling Chinese care which shows how highly unchallenged authority is really held in a land of *laissez-aller*. A flood of Legation servants, happy to be able to serve one of their own great men and no outlander, quickly swarmed round him with cups of tea, trays of champagne, and boxes of sweetmeats and cigars. The great Viceroy treated all these with nodding indifference, leaving it to his own people to secure for him an immense array of dishes and trays, which they distributed to his immediate neighbourhood on numerous teapoys. He might or might not wish to eat and drink. Every possibility must be provided for. Finally settled in comfort, with this bothering crowd departed, the old man puffed contentedly at his long pipe, and made comments now and again in a loud hoarse voice which carried all through the rooms. He was certainly remarkable.

A hundred eyes looked at him curiously. He it was who, the confidential archives of the Legations already disclosed, had really prepared everything which had come about since the close of the disastrous Japanese war. Largely out of spite to Japan owing to the fatal termination of his Korean adventure, he had arranged, when he had been in Moscow at the Czar's coronation a year or two before, the true basis of the Russian railway invasion in Manchuria, and thus paved the way for all subsequent developments. People in those days of a decade ago were only beginning to realize what this might ultimately mean; but as they gazed at the immense frame of this far-seeing Chinese Bismarck, their imaginations were momentarily lit with the light of understanding. In a vague way the feeling possessed this indifferent little diplomatic world that a master-man had come among them, contemptuous of them, and certain that he was fully justified in such contempt from the mere fact that distributed around the capital over millions of square miles of territory were vast, latent forces which some day would obey a common impulse and regain in a few efforts what had been lost in decades of inertia.

For a few minutes, whilst the host and his secretaries made conversation to the great man, people watched him attentively. Then a new line of late arrivals, searching for the host and hostess, broke up the groups which had formed, and amidst a growing murmur and movement the great Viceroy was gradually forgotten.

CHAPTER IX

"Nous désirerions peu de choses avec ardeur, si nous connaissions parfaitement ce que nous desirons."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

PETER KERR was among the late arrivals. He had been dining elsewhere, and he had only managed to excuse himself after several attempts. He had heard that this was to be a big affair, and he was anxious to see it.

As he came up the steps of the broad main entrance, at which stood a group of gorgeous but rather useless servants, he saw going in just ahead of him a little dark man with a beard, accompanied by a tall woman. Something in the poise of her shoulders caught his attention at once. It seemed to him that she walked disdainfully—as if she felt contempt for her escort. Kerr followed quickly. Yes, he was sure—it was his lady of the verandah.

With an easy movement she drew off a black lace mantilla, and handed it without a word or a look to her husband. After an almost imperceptible pause she passed from the hall into the reception-rooms, and was lost to his sight.

Involuntarily Peter Kerr stopped and walked back a few steps, as if he had changed his mind about going into the house. Somehow he had not expected to meet her like this—he had pictured her as living in a world apart from this little society of exiles which dined and wined one another too frequently. He was almost disillusioned by seeing her walking in ahead of him like any other person. It was prosaic—unromantic—out of keeping with what he would have liked. Ever since his curious adventure, she had been shadowy, unrealizable. He had never seen her again, not even on the verandah. She had carefully shut herself off from all possible view by the aid of screens. And now here she was——

"Hello, Kerr, what are you doing stuck there?"

The cheery voice of the square-looking American Secretary of Legation, who had become quite a friend of his, suddenly sounded immediately behind him, and drew him out of his reverie. The American was standing just outside the front door puffing violently at a cigar which was only half smoked. He took the cigar from his mouth and eyed it affectionately after he had spoken.

"What are you doing stuck there?" he repeated in his strong rasping voice.

Kerr laughed.

"Waiting for somebody to go in with," he replied with easy prevarication. "There's an immense crowd."

"It's a beautiful night," reflected the American, "and I hate to throw this away. However, I suppose it's got to go, unless we stay camped here for quite a spell."

He puffed violently for a few seconds, and then with a resolute movement he suddenly hurled his enticing weed far away. A chair-coolie, squatting as silently as an image under the lea of one of the great pug-dog lions, rose and slipped away after it like a shadow in the night. The American observed him and laughed.

"I guess it's gone where it will be useful," he said in his emphatic manner. "Now for the line-up."

He squared his shoulders in mockery and then linked his arm in Kerr's. Together the two men entered the hall, talking about the curious way things were moving in the capital. Kerr kept his eyes on the alert. Where had she gone to? Though he glanced everywhere, he could find no trace in the drawing-rooms of this graceful Madame Boisragon. In company with their host, who had succeeded in disembarrassing himself of the Viceroy, the two men looked in on the small ballroom where an opening lancers was being danced. Neither was she there. Together the two men seized the opportunity, in one of the intervals, to bid the hostess good evening. Then, having done everything that was expected of them, they turned and sauntered in the direc-

tion of the smoking-room. Kerr tried to drift away, but the American felt talkative and would not let him go.

"There's a devil of a lot of tin plate and pewter out to-night," he drily commented. He gave a nod back to where they had been. A serried mass of decorated men, fat and thin, old and young, guarded the ballroom entrance.

"I mean all those plaques and decorations," he continued. "They amuse me. We can't have them, of course, but it isn't that hurts. I don't so much mind an old fellow—a really respectable old fellow with a beard, a corporation, and grey hairs—having a scarf round his shirt-front and a line of decorations over his heart, but it's the young fellows that get on my nerves. They have little ones that look cheap. With us Sousa's men have them—bandsmen, you know."

Peter Kerr broke into a laugh. The description was certainly good.

"I suppose," he replied, "it curbs the republican spirit in worn-out monarchies. A little tin plate and pewter sometimes goes a long way, and it doesn't cost much."

The American made a wry face and pinched Peter Kerr's arm.

"It's about time you fellows threw it up. What's the sense of measuring men that way? See here, there was once a man——"

He began a fabulous account which came to a comical climax, and just as he finished the little dark man with the beard walked in a melancholy way across the room.

"Who is that man?" said Kerr. "Do you know him?"

He watched his companion narrowly, curious to know his attitude. The American was a very frank fellow. If he had heard anything he would certainly say it.

"Oh, that," he said indifferently, "that's a man named Boisragon. He's running a big railway scheme—same game as you. I know him just a little, but he's away most of the time." Kerr was reassured.

"He has a wife——" he began again. The American's

quick mind instantly leaped to an understanding, and he grinned broadly.

"Say, that was poor work," he protested, pinching Kerr's arm again in his joking way. "A blind man could have seen clean through that. Where's the wife—what about her?"

"That is what I want to find out," rejoined Kerr, totally unembarrassed. "I want you, in fact, to get the husband to introduce you, and then——"

"Anything to provide amusement for a friend," interrupted his companion, dropping his arm. "Watch out how quick I work. It will be up to you to follow my lead."

He strolled across in his nonchalant way and greeted the ugly little man before he had time to evade him. The ugly little man indeed swerved aside, as if he wished to be left alone like a number of other people who were moving to and fro in the rooms like uneasy spirits, but it was no use. Kerr saw the two men talking for a time together, and he wondered what his American was saying. Suddenly he saw him take the other man by the arm and lead him off. He seemed almost to be leading him against his will—but that was a minor consideration.

He saw the two men go through the main room in which was sitting China's Grand Old Man, and then he saw that they went out to a verandah which looked out on a small inner courtyard. Understanding that he would have to wait a little, he now paused with interest near the group surrounding the old Viceroy, and wondered whether he should not avail himself of this opportunity to get presented. The great Li Hung Chang was now talking volubly in an immensely loud voice, apparently quite satisfied with his surroundings, and anxious to appear good-humoured. A silky interpreter turned everything he said alternately into English and French with the greatest fluency. The interpreter, a man from the southern provinces, was distinctly different in appearance to the other tall and grave Chinese around the Viceroy. He was a true *provençal,* small, quick, alert, all

eyes and ears. Hardly had Li Hung Chang finished speaking before his smooth voice had begun again. "The Viceroy says that in his opinion——" Time after time Kerr heard this stereotyped opening, and stood amused at the caustic manner in which this Chinese Bismarck expressed his opinion on men and things. Since many standing there understood something of the vernacular, the most the interpreter could do was to modify his chief's crudities of speech. Several times even the interpreter hesitated; then with a deprecating smile he quickly recovered himself and glibly recited something which brought ripples of laughter from the cosmopolitan audience. It was a wonderful exhibition of cleverness and diplomacy; for the interpreter was looking out for pitfalls. At some recent reception, in spite of all attempts to palliate it, there had been a very unfortunate *contretemps*. A lady professor had been presented to Li Hung Chang. The old man, seeing that she was young and pleasant-looking, had promptly asked what she was doing in Peking. On learning that she was studying art, and collecting examples of Chinese paintings and porcelains for her university, he had turned to his interpreter and in front of every one had said gruffly, "Well, she is acting stupidly. Tell her to go home and marry quickly so as to have many babies. That is her proper business." The anecdote speedily became so celebrated that the unfortunate lady had to disappear before her collections were complete.

Kerr waited fully ten minutes listening, but the circle round the Viceroy did not break up, and so he abandoned his idea of getting presented. He strolled slowly away, avoiding numerous servants in flowing robes who were tempting the unwary with the champagne which had so distressed the youthful *attaché* at the dinner-table. It was about the right time now, Kerr calculated, to make his appearance; and so, without further hesitation, he went straight to his objective.

He recognized at once the American's voice coming from an angle of the verandah which was prettily masked by some palms and pots of flowers. People who had finished dancing

were passing to and fro and saying how warm it was. The American was talking in his same half-joking, half-serious manner, punctuating his sentences with short laughs and running on from one thing to another with the greatest ease. He was a jovial fellow who could make himself at home anywhere, and possessed a proper republican contempt for every one who stood on ceremony. Plainly he was talking against time, and so Kerr came forward with calculated deliberation. The American let him approach within measurable distance.

"I am really awfully sorry," he said suddenly, "but duty is duty, and I must find my Minister for a moment. Will you allow me? How lucky, here is the very man!"

He got up and called to Kerr.

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and continued in his cordial manner: "If you will allow me, I would like to present Mr. Kerr—a very good friend of mine and an excellent fellow." And with that he fled.

Peter Kerr found himself murmuring something unintelligible. He was glad that the lighting was so discreet.

"Won't you sit down?" said the lady quietly, rustling her skirts. "There is just room on this cane seat."

He murmured his thanks, and wondered how he should best break the ice. She was treating him as a complete stranger. The situation was a little odd, certainly. The last—the only time—he had spoken to her was in sufficiently uncommon circumstances; it would be absurd to recur at once to those circumstances. Yet—he cleared his throat.

"It is very dull, don't you think, if one doesn't dance," remarked the lady, saying with amazing resourcefulness the most natural thing in the world. Perhaps that was responsible for his next speech:

"I have found it very exciting; I've been trying to see you for days, and now——"

"Really," she replied briefly. He thought that her expression was vacillating between a pucker and a smile—but it was too dark to be quite sure.

"My courage wasn't equal to my desire," he continued, "or else I should not have wasted the last half-hour." He wished she would say something; he had the feeling that he had been too abrupt. Would she resent it?

"Since we know one another properly," she rejoined at last, in her same calm manner, ignoring what he had just said, "you will perhaps tell me how you found out that I was here."

He laughed with a recovered sense of ease.

"It was not very difficult," he explained, trying to make out her expression. She was carefully leaning back, however; still, he could see that her eyes were fixed on his. The outlook was not unpromising. He went on:

"I had the pleasure of coming to the front door immediately behind you, and I recognized you at once by your back. It was not very brilliant, you see. It did not require the ability of a Monsieur Lecoq."

She laughed a little and shifted her position ever so slightly.

"That is only half the answer."

He wondered whether it would be wise to be quite frank.

"Your husband," he began tentatively, moving one arm back towards the drawing-rooms in an explanatory gesture.

"Ah!" she exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon," he said, somewhat surprised. He had taken the wrong road, he was now quite sure.

"It is nothing," she replied, speaking nevertheless in a different voice. "How stupid of me not to have understood before."

"You see," he proceeded, trying to recover the ground he felt he had lost, "I did not know that I should have the pleasure of meeting you out in Peking, and as soon as I saw you, of course I determined to get to know you in the ordinary way. I wished to learn whether you had got over your accident—whether you were none the worse for it. It was the natural thing, was it not? That was my sole reason."

"It was very kind of you," she replied, her voice showing

that she had forgotten the rest. "The little cut you bandaged so well is hidden under here. Can you see?"

She parted her dark brown hair with her long fingers, and showed him how she had skilfully covered over the place by dressing her hair lower on her forehead.

"It is already almost well," she continued. "Peking must be a wonderful place for healing. It looks only like a scratch."

"I can see nothing," said Kerr, truthfully enough, since it was too dark to see. "Still, I almost envy the healing properties of the Peking air."

Something in her look tempted him to proceed. She had become a little stiff again in her attitude; it was that which egged him on.

"I mean I should have liked to play the doctor again," he continued. "I have often thought of that little midnight scene. You were so angry with me at first; you were willing to make me responsible for everything—though afterwards you relented. I believe I shall always think of you as I saw you first."

"Things out of the common never happen exactly in the same way twice," she rejoined slowly, with assumed indifference. Yet, in spite of the discreet light, he was sure she had coloured; and the knowledge gave him curious satisfaction.

"Monsieur Boisragon must have been very sorry to hear about it when he came back?" he remarked, curious to confirm an impression which had grown up in his mind.

She glanced at him sharply, as if wondering why he had made that speech, and then sat up stiffly.

"My husband, who returned only this afternoon," she answered coldly, "knows nothing about it. There was no reason to tell him, and I shall certainly never mention it."

Yes—he was sure of it now. So he quickly turned to other things.

"I suppose you will not stay in Peking all through the summer," he inquired. "The heat is intolerable, they say,

and the rains unhealthy enough to kill a cat. See how warm it is even to-night."

"The summer—do not talk of the summer yet when May has scarcely commenced," she answered. "The country is delicious just now in the early morning—it is almost unbelievable after the city—and I love it."

Kerr sat up in his surprise.

"The country," he murmured, "there is only one way of reaching it—by riding. Therefore you ride and I never knew it!"

There was such hurt surprise in his voice that Madame Boisragon suddenly began laughing quietly.

"I ride almost every morning," she said; "you seem very astonished?"

"Astonished—certainly I am astonished," he confessed, glad that they were now talking naturally. "I thought you were a sort of hermit—a recluse who could not be lured forth from your cell. When one never sees a person who lives in the same place—who is indeed only ten yards off—can one be blamed for thinking that? Is it possible to know in which direction you generally ride?"

She had a provoking way of sitting silent when she should have spoken. But this time he was determined. People were coming near them looking for seats; they might be interrupted.

"You have not answered me," he said.

"I was thinking," she replied, and then allowed a few more seconds to go by. "You know the Temple of the Sun and the winding road which leads to the canal?" she continued finally. "I shall ride there the day after to-morrow at half-past six in the morning."

Then she got up and held out her hand. He caught a full view of her as she passed into the flood of light streaming from the drawing-room windows—and he was infinitely glad that he had been so successful. Yet in many ways this second meeting had been as curious as the first. He wondered to himself a good deal about Madame Boisragon as he mixed again with the crowd.

CHAPTER X

"Il ne faut jamais hasarder la plaisanterie, même la plus douce et la plus permise, qu'avec des gens polis ou qui ont de l'esprit."—LA BRUYÈRE.

"IT was apparently very gay last night—*un monde fou?*" said Lorenzo, adding the French expression to his English comment to give it special point.

Lorenzo had addressed the remark to Carnot with odd familiarity, and the hotel-keeper at once answered him in the same careless way. Carnot had soon told in little snatches all he knew about the latest Legation entertainment. As he sat busy in his little office with his account-books and his correspondence, he deemed it a pleasant thing to amuse himself thus; to be garrulous; to make rude comments; to indulge in much buffoonery.

Carnot always knew what was going on everywhere, down to the most intimate details, and Lorenzo delighted to hear him talk. It was doubtlessly a divine dispensation that there should be such a person in the town to play the part of Figaro. Once a lady staying in the hotel, suffering from the prosaic discomfort of corns, had asked Carnot if there was such a thing as a local chiropodist to be had. "Of course," Carnot had exclaimed, "and our Chinaman is a good corn-cutter too. He is busy the whole time, for he is immensely popular. He is almost one of the local amusements! On Monday, for instance, he cuts the corns of Madame So-and-so; on Tuesday those of the wife of the Minister of That; on Wednesday he comes here." And continuing in this amiable vein he did not stop until he had told everything he knew of the good man's clientele. It had been a bad quarter of an hour for the lady in question, for she was a new arrival and had not acquired the conti-

nental art of being amazingly interested even in such particularly personal affairs. She was in fact very angry.

Lorenzo, however, since it suited his purpose, and no matter what people might think, placed himself with calm indifference on the same footing as the hotel-keeper, and openly delighted in such talk; and now, seated in the little hotel-office, with his chair tilted back and the usual black cigar between his teeth, he was engaged in gleaning all he could. He liked to spend an hour or two of the morning in this way—it was like getting back to Europe, he said, to hear all the local *can-cans*—the growls and the bites and the barks—for out on the street there were only billows of dust and endless blue-coated people hurrying along—a great, unthinking yellow world absorbed in its own business, and utterly divided from the little white world living in its midst.

Also at this hour there was no one to incommode the pair in the office save two pale Chinese clerks who, seated opposite each other at a diminutive table, added up endless strings of figures to a sharp clicking of the abacus, and who were no more noticed than had they been lay figures. The Italian, apart from his innate love of gossip, really believed in its intrinsic value in such a place as this strange capital. By means of gossip he was constantly picking up clues which might otherwise have eluded him; and using these clues, he was nearly always in a position to know exactly what was going on and what new dangers to his projects might suddenly arise. It was a situation specially suited to a person saturated with the traditions of the middle ages, as well as fully alive to the fact that this is the Age of Gold.

Carnot would not have been so obliging to every one. It was because Lorenzo amused him very much by his extraordinary persistence and the masterly manner in which he worked with any material which came into his hands that he liked to help him. Nothing was too small or too big for Lorenzo. In Carnot's eyes, the Italian had remarkable ability—a thing which he was only prepared to grant to very few of those who so constantly sojourned in his hostelry

in quest of rapid fortunes to be won through Chinese ignorance and corruption. Lorenzo, with the cunning of a Machiavelli, always seemed to be able to pick the valuable from the valueless with unerring instinct—that alone was a mighty gift. He was therefore, from the moment he arrived, far more suited to this Oriental world than the vast majority of men who had lived in it half their lives and still did not understand it in the least. That was what surprised and delighted Carnot—this man fitted the situation like a glove. He was so easy in his manner, so supple, so adaptive; and possessed, above all, a talent little short of marvellous for showing by insinuations and felt touches to men of the most dissimilar colour or nationality the advantages of anything on which he was pleased to lay insistence. He was also very cynical—a turn of mind which, if properly held in check, is of much greater market value than is popularly supposed. For it is well to know that it is the cynic who generally first sees the line of least resistance—the line along which, owing to the weakness of human nature, most things progress—unless exceptional forces come into play. A shrewd cynic, should he possess energy, need never remain a poor man in the present era.

Lorenzo, however, in spite of his great gifts, was locally highly unpopular, and most people in the dull-minded little world in which he for the time being lived found it easiest to belittle him by proclaiming that he was evidently no gentleman—which pronouncement affected him as little as most others he constantly heard. In a capital beginning to suffer acutely from panic owing to barefaced aggression it is doubtful how far a person desirious of acting nobly would have gone—and that was just what Lorenzo argued. Just then common cunning was much more useful than all the virtues in the world. It was a question of ready wits and nothing else—a state of affairs Lorenzo had understood from the very instant of his arrival. Whilst it is not yet permissible to say that a man's success or non-success in life is the real measure of his worth, the time is evidently

fast approaching when certain old standards are to be set aside; and this was what Lorenzo also believed.

As he now sat there familiarly with Carnot, he was well aware that it would be thought intolerable that he should condescend to extract every bit of gossip and every scrap of talk he could after this particular method. Yet it was just that which amused him, instead of irritating him; for Lorenzo always had, quite openly, the courage of his methods, which is much better, be it remarked, than merely having the courage of one's opinions. So now, having heard all the general details regarding an entertainment to which he had not been bidden, he amused himself with his cigar and a close contemplation of his finger-nails pending the asking of certain questions which were not in any way related to what the pair had hitherto talked about. Carnot had not yet finished despatching some business; and until he had finished he would not be quite as communicative as Lorenzo desired. There is a science of knowing when to speak, just as there is the art of listening.

"Li Hung Chang was there," said Lorenzo at last reflectively, esteeming the right moment had arrived. He spoke not as if he were stating a fact, but as if he were asking for a brief summary of all the great Viceroy had done during the whole evening.

Carnot looked up instantly from his account-books, with a grin and wink—and suddenly dropped his pen.

"It must have been very funny," he said gruffly in French. "He was surrounded, covered the whole time—it was just like flies on a dead horse! Many were searching for an opportunity for a word alone; but the old man on purpose shouted his answers so that every one could hear. There were several good *contretemps*."

"For instance?" Lorenzo took his cigar from his mouth and looked interested.

"Have you not heard about the German?"

Lorenzo shook his head.

"Well," said Carnot, "that was a good thrust. A Ger-

man came up and was presented. 'Merchant or missionary?' asked the old man, pointing a finger at him. 'A merchant, Your Excellency,' answered the interpreter, 'who is travelling through the empire.' 'Good!' said the Viceroy; 'if he is killed he can be settled for in cash—but the next missionaries will cost us a whole province, I am much afraid.' "

Lorenzo laughed so heartily that Carnot was flattered and went on talking. There seemed no end to his tales. There were all sorts of stories regarding the methods he employed to satisfy his own insatiable curiosity. Yet the truth was very simple. It was merely by keeping his ears open that he gleaned such an astonishing lot of titbits in which truth and fiction were so picturesquely and strangely mixed.

"It was certainly a great opportunity," remarked Lorenzo reflectively when Carnot had apparently exhausted his entire stock of anecdotes. "The only way to succeed with these people is to sit right down in front of them and force yourself on them. Then they just manage to remember you when you wish them to. That is half the battle here—perhaps even the whole battle—how to make one's self remembered. Fortunately I am now past that stage—they will not easily forget me—but for others it was undoubtedly a good opportunity."

Lorenzo's mind turned instinctively to the new matter he had in hand, and as he thought, he slowly opened a little note-book and began jotting something down. At once the two clerks in the corner twisted their almond eyes round to see what he was doing. Except for their eyes they had not moved a muscle. Yet Lorenzo noticed their eyes, and was a little irritated.

"What are you doing?" said Carnot, looking up. Finally the scribble of Lorenzo's pencil had also aroused his own curiosity. The Italian was now writing quickly and apparently unendingly.

Lorenzo finished first and then observed Carnot coolly for a moment. He also restored the note-book to his pocket before answering, as if it were safest to have it out of

sight. The incident was peculiarly characteristic of the intercourse between the two men.

"Mon ami," he said in French in a new manner, "I find you at times too curious, but for once I will let you know. I noted that I had an appointment at four o'clock."

Carnot smiled, and the two clerks, having heard, exchanged incredulous looks and resumed their work.

"Blagueur," murmured the Swiss unbelievingly. He was not at all annoyed with the rebuff Lorenzo had administered. Sometimes Carnot became angry because that was the easiest way out of a difficulty; but he did not really understand what it meant to be annoyed.

"I would like to know something more about that man Boisragon," began Lorenzo after a while. "He is very amusing the way he hides himself, as well as his wife—the way he appears only to disappear. He was there last night."

"I know a lot about him," remarked Carnot, not looking up from his books.

"Well?" said Lorenzo inquiringly.

"I am sorry, Monsieur Lorenzo," replied the hotel-keeper with mock politeness, "but I am very busy just now. I will oblige you later. I will tell you at four o'clock." He burst out laughing, delighted at his talent for repartee.

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders.

"That is so old," he said.

"Things that are new are not necessarily the best," announced Carnot, rather offended that his wit was not applauded.

Lorenzo yawned and began watching the other corner of the room. He had been rather clumsy about Boisragon, he reflected; for he very much wanted to know a number of things about him. However, he could wait, so he would be indifferent.

The fat Chinaman who acted as the hotel-runner had just come up and thrust his head through a little trap-door near the two clerks, and was now vainly brandishing a sheet

of paper at them. The two supercilious young men treated these overtures with studied indifference, and even pretended not to notice them. The fat man several times withdrew his head to address sarcastic comments about the appearance of the clerks to two or three others of his kind who were idly watching the comedy with their noses flattened against another little window. Yet that had no effect. So the fat man suddenly made up his mind to go further. He succeeded after an effort in getting his whole head and shoulders through the trap-door. Then by stretching out an arm he could just wave his account-paper under the noses of the young clerks. As they still pretended to take no notice, at last he angrily flung it down right on top of their books. Without raising their heads, simultaneously they flicked it to the ground. There was a titter from the onlookers behind the window, and the fat man, having lost face, exploded into hoarse oaths. Carnot instantly wheeled round in his chair.

"Allons, allons!" he cried gruffly; "what the devil are you all doing? Is this a circus?"

Lorenzo, stifling his laughter, began urging the fat man to go on. So the fat man explained the rudeness of the two clerks. White with sudden anger at his words, they rose and tried to shut the trap-door in his face.

"I back the fat man," said Lorenzo, enjoying it all hugely. The fat man was certainly winning the day, for he brought his weight into play, and the noses against the other window were so highly interested in the performance that they nearly burst through the glass.

"We are insulted," said the two clerks in Chinese to Carnot, finally seeing that they could not beat the fat man and preparing to leave the room.

"Sit down," roared Carnot; "and you—come here."

The fat man instantly desisted and came round to the door and stood there penitently. The clerks at once banged the trap-door to. At that sound the fat man's good-

humoured face looked so ridiculous with conflicting emotions that even Carnot smiled.

"Rascal," he said, "I will beat you if you make more trouble. Bring your account here."

The man walked across the room and picked the paper from the ground, murmuring taunts to the clerks at the same time which made them tremble.

"In future give your accounts to me," commanded Carnot, dismissing him. The fat man, having triumphed, walked out solemnly and calmly to the hall, put on his battered Terai hat, and joined the others who were gazing in delight through the glass at the two beaten clerks. The ring of faces said so much that the clerks could scarcely continue working.

Lorenzo stood up and looked at his watch.

"Boisragon," he began once more tentatively, coming back to his point.

"Boisragon is a sly man," said Carnot facetiously, "about whom you may learn everything in a few years."

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders and walked out on his way to the Club. He was quite satisfied now, for he had made up his mind on certain points. All the time he had been sitting there he had been idly gazing at a big piece of paper which Carnot consulted from time to time. Though it was upside down to him he had at length managed to grasp its contents. It was a distribution of the rooms of the little hotel. By following the numbers he had gone over the list until he had grasped the contents. Against the rooms occupied by the Boisragons he had deciphered—"Fresh instructions; retained indefinitely."

That was certainly interesting—highly interesting, and gave him a clue. He thought of the next thing he should try to find out. That would be harder.

No sooner did the clerks hear the hotel-doors swing to behind him than they coughed together several times.

Immediately Carnot looked up as if he understood the meaning of that.

"What is it?" he said gruffly in Chinese.

The two young men pointed simultaneously with their pens.

"That paper."

"Well?"

"He saw it all the time," said the two clerks.

"Hein!" remarked Carnot, crossly locking it up in a drawer.

The two clerks smiled across to each other, and their spirits began to rise. The Italian had been paid back a little for his partisanship of the fat man. As for the fat man, they would try and give him later a really bad time—in other ways familiar to all Asia.

CHAPTER XI

"Une femme qui n'a pas été jolie n'a pas été jeune."—MME. SWETCHINE.

THE rolling country around the vast walled city had changed in a somewhat miraculous manner since Peter Kerr had first travelled into it on the blazing spring day of his arrival. Then it had been one vast monotone of winter browns, only relieved here and there by the dark green trees which surrounded the endless family burying-places of an ancestor-worshipping country and by the few willow and elm trees irresolutely distributed in the neighbourhood of the straggling and untidy mud villages. These trees had indeed been the only promising things—otherwise the land had seemed as stale and as flat and as unprofitable as poor mother earth can possibly be. It all appeared to the eye as a vast region taking the passage of seasons unprofitably in a state of unalterable brownness.

The dust-powdered highways on such days looked even grey—that peculiar grey which comes from old age and continual ill treatment—and the toiling teams, slowly trundling their great loads over all difficulties to the tune of much raucous cursing and much cracking of whips—these luckless teams seemed bowed down in the same despondency. The vicious dust-storms of early spring, sweeping over the mountains from far-away Mongolia and the Gobi Desert, expended their last efforts in threshing this hapless country until sometimes it turned to an unbelievable grey from very pain. Winter had passed: summer had not yet come—the land was between the devil and the deep blue sea—and there was no health in it. It seemed impossible, indeed, during these dust-storms, which only stopped to begin once more, that anything could really live and thrive in such

an unhappy clime. That the land should lie eternally brown, or grey, seemed only meet and proper.

Yet when the wind veered to the south, the quarter in which it fortunately lay when the gods had brought Peter Kerr to Peking, forthwith the great big sun, shining searchingly like a wrathful Mormon eye on all trembling souls, would jump the mercury of the thermometer from the forties and fifties to the eighties and nineties, making the early spring seem almost summer. The brownness of the soil would still remain for a few days—but only for a few days, a very few days. Then the miracle of spring would come. It was delicious; it was wonderful; it was unbelievable. Nature, perhaps ashamed of her rude and uncouth aspect with the marriage month of May so very near, decided in the night to garb herself properly, and, *hé presto,* the land would be green—a sort of nile-green, seeming many shades different from all the other greens in the world because of the grey-brown soil and the copper sun, and the memory of the abomination of desolation which had so long endured.

Accompanying this there would be another miracle. Not only did the barrenness depart, but everything became different, quite different. The distances were different, the contours of the earth were different, the roads were different—yes, the very villages and the people became different—all the throbbing, living, moving, shouting, laughing, cursing world was changed. Mere ugly outlines seemed suddenly softened and changed, as if some subtle influence, stealing gently everywhere, banished all memory of the iron winter and the angry spring—and the nearness of the great deserts beyond the monstrous boundary wall of China—and all the other rude and horrid things suggestive of a barbarous land. Everything must be forgotten—everything, for the marriage month of May was very near. Nature called with her insistent voice; Nature bade men and things forget all save that fleeting time could not stand still, and that this rare season of greenness must be speedily taken advantage of.

And that is just why the winter and summer in this land were as unlike as Moor and Greek.

Madame Boisragon had ridden into this blooming country very early in the morning, accompanied only by her *mafu,* or Chinese groom. Both were mounted on the stumpy but powerful China pony, which is not really a product of China at all, but of Mongolia. These little beasts, which at first sight appear ridiculous to those accustomed only to slim and dainty-footed thoroughbreds, are brought down yearly in thousands through the great mountain passes from the grasslands beyond the Great Wall and are speedily impressed into all kinds of service. They are raced; they pull carts and carriages; they carry packs; they become veritable beasts-of-all-work, capable of resisting fatigue in a remarkable manner. The freezing cold and the sweating summer seem to mean but little to them. Always willing, they will go, like the best blooded stock, to the last gasp. Generally ill-cared for, and poorly fed on a rough diet of chopped straw and *kaoliang* grain, they have a singularly unprepossessing appearance. Yet a few weeks of good treatment and good food will change an uncouth woolly-coated beast into a very tolerable imitation of a light cob.

The pretty black gelding ridden by Madame Boisragon had been brought to such a fine condition that the toss of his head and his springy action made him almost an Arab in looks. He had just been galloped hard along the great sandy stretches under the Tartar city wall; and now, breathless and trembling with excitement, he danced as if his feet were on springs through the little flanking city gate leading into the open country. The ancient stoneway, broken and full of dangerous holes, rang with the quick stamp of his iron, and for a few moments Madame Boisragon trembled for her safety. Yet she soon forgot that in the scene without. It was a feast of the senses to drink in the wonderful colouring which the rising sun was now flinging over the country.

In the nut-dry atmosphere every detail stood out as clear-cut as a cameo—as if light and shade had been carved from solid things.

Immediately behind her the wonderful, crenellated city walls now stretched away in stiff ruler-like lines, crowned at regular intervals with the imposing square towers of painted timber and brick which give a curious symmetry and distinction to what would otherwise appear like some giant geometrical diagram set in relief on a sandy plain. Against the yellow-brown stretches of sand, banked up very high by the winds of ages, the Tartar walls now looked blue-grey. There was something singularly pure and impressive in their calm dignity. The nearer towers, though the barbaric reds and greens which stained their mighty rafters were lost in the distance, threw off glints of gold from their tarnished gilding and sudden flashes from their copperwork as the sun swung ever upwards. Beyond the sand-banks ran broad and muddy canals forming parallel lines to the city walls, and indeed designed to lend the walls greater strength by being thus interposed between them and all possible enemies. In mediæval times, to bridge those broad canals under a fierce fire from bowmen and matchlockmen posted above was in itself a great business: to storm the walls themselves was well-nigh impossible. No wonder that this great capital had only succumbed to the Manchu conquerors after the employment of treachery!

Outside the great walls and the sandy stretches and the encircling canals were many low-lying houses standing together in irregular masses which yet seemed to possess, despite their dilapidation and confusion, a last remnant of the stiff camplike lines which had once distinguished every inch of the Tartar capital. It was a permanent encampment in brick and stone, both within and without the great walls—an encampment so great that it had overflowed into the country. Here, in those days of a decade or so ago, under the Tartar walls there was still much practising with

the twanging Manchu longbow, proficiency in which entitled the privileged Manchu clansmen to become Palace guards, protecting the entrances to the Forbidden City night and day. These longbows, sending arrows home true and hard into little red and white targets, still seemed to their owners to possess virtues which had really long disappeared. They might even help to remove the foreign menace—who knew! The archers, stripped to the waist and working together in groups, had even that morning followed the two galloping ponies with taunts and shouts, as if the sight of a white woman had at once brought to their minds a vivid recollection of the wrongs now inflicted on the dynasty. It was almost a wonder that such shouts were not backed up with arrows.

Yet once these scenes were left behind, one came as if by magic into a world utterly unrelated to the strange mediæval city of the Tartars. It was a world common to all peoples, be they brown or yellow or white, the world of tillers of the soil, earning by the sweat of their brows a bare livelihood, and having scant time to trouble about anything else. The country beyond the city walls served to make clear to the observant eye all Chinese history. The people of the land, the real Chinese, were peaceful cultivators who in their distant golden ages of art and culture had attained the zenith of their happiness. Always menaced by the warlike and uncouth peoples of the deserts and rolling steppes of the north—the lands beyond the mountain passes—after constant struggles to retain their self-sufficient happiness, they had at last succumbed so often to the enemy that conquest had seemed their natural lot and they ceased to care. It is true that these hordes, after the actual shock of battle had been forgotten, because of their consanguinity had always been content to leave the common people much as they were before, only retaining in their hands the essential outer symbols of Imperial Power—such as the Dragon Throne, the worship of Heaven at the appointed altars, the posses-

sion of the mighty entrenched capital, designed by Tartars of many centuries ago, the manning of a dozen strategic strong places which dominated the provinces.

Yet though only these things were usurped, in themselves they were amply sufficient to destroy the old ideal Chinese state. It was without doubt such usurpation which had introduced the canker which caused the old stone bridges, the temples, the canals, the countless monuments of the real Chinese times, to fall into ruins. It was the capital and the Dragon Throne which alone counted after each conquest—the steel head fitted to the pliant wooden shaft needed alone be kept bright. Yet the brightness of the steel head, in such an enervating environment, inevitably itself became illusive—the conquerors, without knowing it, were conquered by the sloth around them. And therefore when the final blow to China had come—the blow dealt by the white man, simply because he had come to this land in his thousands and had demonstrated by the arts of peace just as much as by the arts of war that the world can never stand still—nothing more was needed to complete the illustration of unalterable laws. A land enslaved by a process of sterilization, coming as the aftermath of conquest, is a land lost in the modern struggle. That was as clear as the cameolike aspect of the savage old capital itself.

To Madame Boisragon, the immense walled city, now that it was receding into the middle distance—with a broad belt of green kitchen gardens in the immediate foreground, and the blue-black tracing of the Mongolian mountains in the distant background—seemed more wonderful than ever. Its frowning battlements appeared as unreal as pictures of mediæval Europe probably do to the sceptical eyes of the modern child. It was part of fairyland. To think that in the centre of this city was another Forbidden City, full of an imprisoned humanity made up of concubines, female slaves, eunuchs, and all the other necessary Eastern adjuncts to Imperial Power—a Forbidden City which was the outward and visible sign of the mastery of a mere handful of men

over four hundred million souls—was a little wonderful, certainly. It was a greater miracle than the Mogul power in India had been; and yet, at the same time, by reason of the peaceful nature of the toiling millions, it was no miracle at all. Subtract the European—the foreigner—take him away, and things would be as they had been before. There would be no difficulty in governing at all. The European had played the part of the sharp-eyed child in a book of Eastern tales, the child who, when all the obscquious population of a capital was exclaiming at the matchless silks clothing their vain king as he paraded the streets—the silks which were so finely woven that they existed only in his imagination—called out, "But he is naked—he is not clothed at all!" In the fairy-tale, of course, the child was rewarded and the dishonest merchant who had defeated all competitors by trading on the king's vanity was beheaded; but unfortunately China was no fairy-tale, and the Manchus, having lived by deception, were filled only with hatred by the exposure which had been brought about.

And no wonder! All was so well arranged for them, in spite of the great decay which had set in. They possessed the great capital of Kublai Khan. There were beautiful temples, set like dusty jewels around the city for the Imperial worship—temples of Heaven, of the Earth, of the Sun, of the Moon. Vast Imperial granaries stood under the shadow of the Tartar walls stored with tribute-food brought by canal right up from the great Yang-tse rice-fields to feed the multitude of the conqueror's adherents. Silk garments arrived from the Imperial looms in the south to clothe them all. The royal sable chase, conducted by semi-savage huntsmen on the northern outskirts of the empire, gave them the finest winter clothing. In their walled hunting-parks, they could hunt, if they wished, all manner of wild beasts. Among the foot-hills fringing the rude mountain passes leading to Mongolia were summer pleasaunces with artificial lakes and marble walks and jade fountains and delightful groves which enabled the sovereigns to forget that the most

famous Summer Palace in the world had once been given up to fire and rapine at the hands of European soldiery. Imperial porcelain factories made the most beautiful porcelain; Imperial farms produced precious *ginseng* to cure all sicknesses; Imperial breeding-grounds filled the Imperial studs,—there was everything that mortals could desire. For two hundred and fifty years the fairy godmother had poured everything into the laps of the Manchus they could desire; whilst the people, the four hundred millions, had toiled contentedly as before, each one contributing his little quota towards the support of this tiny dominant race which dwelt in Peking. It was wonderful.

Madame Boisragon was thinking of these things as she now rode slowly along. It was in the air—she could not have helped it. A little group of half-naked children, instead of running after her and begging money, drew suddenly aside with threatening gestures as they saw what she was. That had been taught them by their elders; it was quite a new thing and rather frightened her.

Madame Boisragon now quickly cantered along to a mound which made a great landmark to any one coming along these roads. There she felt sure she would not be hard to find, and just then she had no wish to remain alone. She dismounted and climbed to the top.

Peter Kerr had left the little hotel much before Madame Boisragon, for he was an early riser; but he had taken a different road, and had purposely lingered on his way. A great market-street, full of early morning bustle, had caught his attention and held him enchained. He had never before been in the dealers' quarters of the city, where the wholesale merchants receive and despatch their land-borne freight. The whole process of exchange was now going rapidly on in the simplest forms at this early hour, and made a marvellous scene.

Down the great street where he found himself, the special products of a dozen provinces were being unladen from carts

which were backed right into the warehouses, whilst the unyoked teams lay exhausted on the ground or munched the remains of millet and straw in their clumsy osier feed-baskets. More carts were arriving all the time in long strings. The drivers, powdered in fine grey dust from head to foot, with streaks of sweat making watercourses down their bronzed faces, cracked their whips and shouted lustily as they arrived. Though it was not yet seven in the morning they had already done almost a half-day stage; for they had started perhaps at midnight, so as to arrive as near dawn as possible. Their knowing teams broke into an ambling trot as they scented the end of their labours; whilst the godown-keepers and their apprentices, who were standing at every entrance, awaited the unlading with weighing-rods and measuring-sticks in hand. This was a world of heavy bales, and sweating animals, and blue-clad men half-stripped for the fray; a world invading every foot of the great open thoroughfare in utter contempt for the public weal; a world only interested in its special business of receiving and despatching goods and ready to fight away all intruders.

For the business never ended. After goods had been received, they had to be re-packed and re-weighed and re-labelled and re-marked. For this street was the warehouse for all those peoples of the grassy plains and sandy steppes who depend on the toiling millions of China for their tea, their paper, their tobacco, their every luxury. So in exchange for the skins and furs and hides which they send down by the million, they receive back these things. And it was in this very street that all this exchange and barter was duly arranged for.

And since no wheels could run with profit up into such rough mountain country, pack-animals must go there. The snarling camel, the sure-footed mule, the willing donkey, each was despatched from here carrying its special kind of load. Endless chains of such animals were always travelling up and down the passes—chains which wound in and out of

this street, and finally back again. Summer and winter alike, the trade went on; it never stopped. Only the camels, when the copper sun glared too furiously, were rested in mountain corrals for a month or two, where they shed their thick fur and became bald and hideous as nightmares; but no sooner did autumn bring their new coat of fur than they started again, padding slowly away until they became lost in the immensity of Central Asia. As for the mules and donkeys, nothing ever stopped them save death, and death is very long delayed in China for everything that works.

All was gaiety at that early hour. Musical mountain-bells were tinkling, as strings and strings of these pack-animals started on their long journey or trotted in home. Their drivers followed them calling "left" or "right" in monosyllabic animal-like cries, the mules and donkeys understanding and responding as if they were automatons. On the ground, kneeling together in serried company, were packs of camels, screaming and grunting whenever the warehousemen and drivers loaded them up, but otherwise contemplating in majestic disdain the bustling world around them, whilst their jaws moved in an unending chewing. The camels were more wonderfully human than even the other animals—no liberties could be taken with them. A pound or two more than their correct load of one hundred and twenty catties would set them screaming on the ground long before any tugging at their nose-rings had jerked their hindquarters up and made them gingerly raise themselves on their forelegs. They knew, did these clever camels, that a pound or two more might make all the difference to their gimcrack fetlocks down steep mountain inclines—for a camel's fetlock may be broken as easily as an egg is cracked. Therefore they always screamed and grunted discordantly on the ground before rising as a warning, whilst the lousy warehousemen grinned and consigned their ancestors and their ancestors' ancestors to eternal perdition because no trickery availed with such sapient beasts.

The bustle did not end with this great market-street. For leading off it were countless lanes almost blocked up with the goods being temporarily deposited in them. Every imaginable thing seemed there in wholesale lots, thrown together in an apparently inextricable confusion which yet possessed a certain method and arrangement. There were masses of squealing black pigs lying on their backs, their legs cruelly tied with straw rope, lying perhaps just under the lea of immense stacks of green bamboos from the south. There was coarse pottery—so coarse that it made no matter if any was broken in the unlading or not—piled up in pagodas and pyramids; and side by side with this pottery might be the last thing in the world which should be placed in such company—a great consignment of dried pork stacked on straw mats, or a load of empty wooden coffins arriving from a country district. Pedlars, with a crazy bit of patchwork awning skewed on a framework of sticks and so slanted as to ward off the rays of the uprising sun, shouted their loudest to entice this market world to try the contents of their reeking pots and pans. For they were cooks and pastrymen and pedlars all rolled into one. Other men boldly drove miscellaneous collections of pigs and goats and sheep into the press on their way to the butchers. It was difficult to understand at first how this multifarious life could go on day after day without in the end becoming hopelessly entangled, hopelessly confused. Yet out of the confusion always arose a certain order. Things finally sorted themselves; for people knew exactly what they were doing and why they were doing it. There was noise and piling together, because of the inherent collectivism or communism which belongs to the East—but that did not mean real confusion.

Peter Kerr, drawn to a close inspection of these multitudes since he could only proceed through them at a walk, found himself unconsciously more and more interested in the theatre-like qualities which surrounded him. He began to stop more and more frequently. Here indeed was a stage

with people shouting and disputing; with people laughing and weeping; with people every imaginable thing, as if it were the common lot to come out on to the highways and byways and present all moods openly to the world.

And you could see, too, the great law of compensation everywhere working crudely but successfully. Men swung back to their proper level from the pressure and correcting influence of their fellows. If a man lost his temper and became violent, an inevitable adjustment took place—an adjustment which the violent man perforce must sooner or later accept with good grace. If a man laughed too much, the secret of his laughter was stolen from him and he was left that much the poorer. Where else save in an Asiatic world could story-tellers begin their business at quarter to seven in the morning, and soon be surrounded by a crowd of appreciative listeners? Yet here they were in their dozens. It was something to be the funny man, who twisted his face into marvellous contortions and imitated all the animals around him, when the glint of the rising sun was only beginning to gild the roof-tops. That required a good digestion and a good conscience to do; for humour is best when the sun is down and the work of the day over. These things caused Peter Kerr to dally greatly; and only when he was beyond the city and in the open country did he commence his ride in earnest.

Madame Boisragon had chosen her coign of vantage well. Seated on the edge of the old Chinese mound, her blue skirt and blue veil were as plain to the eye of any one coming along these country roads as if they had been signal-flags. Peter Kerr caught sight of her when he was a long way off and came up at a gallop.

"Good-morning," he cried as he swung himself to the ground.

"Good-morning," she replied. "How did you get here?"

He had come to her by a flanking road instead of by the

great main road down which she had been gazing, and his sudden appearance had taken her by surprise.

"I lost myself," he answered, taking off his sun-helmet and wiping his forehead before clambering up. "That is, I became lost in a marvellous street where all the world was buying and selling and loading and unloading—a regular caravan street. I could not help stopping." He described some of the things that had stopped him. "Have you ever seen those long brass trumpets of the knife-grinders?" he inquired. "There were three of those men together under the City Gates, and just as I passed they turned their trumpets up and blew a sharp chorus. I fully expected the walls to fall like the walls of Jericho!"

Madame Boisragon watched his face as he talked. He was oddly conscious of her looks; for she had a peculiar way of fixing her eyes and never moving them—until she felt that she herself was being observed, when she immediately dropped them and turned with an impatient movement.

"How curious!" she reflected aloud when he had finished, now gazing at a long line of carts coming down the high-road. "We have both been interesting ourselves in much the same subject. I myself was thinking about this old city all the way here; but whilst you were absorbed in the commercial features, picturing Peking as a sort of huge caravanserai, I was taken with the idea that it was only an encampment of people who have enormously degenerated by their confinement within its massive walls. I wonder which of us is right?"

She told him about the archers she had seen under the wall and how they had insolently shouted after her. Her pale face, shaded by a broad-brimmed Terai hat round which was pinned her big blue veil, somehow made an odd contrast to her subject. She seemed to bear no relation to this alien world—to be incapable of really understanding it—to be afraid of it.

"Perhaps," Kerr replied presently, when she had finished,

"we are both of us right in our views. The problem is merely to adjust them properly. Do you remember the two rival correspondents in Jules Verne's 'Michael Strogoff'? The English correspondent looks out of the window on one side of a railway-carriage and sees mountainous country; he enters promptly in his note-book, 'Country very mountainous.' The Frenchman, of course, looks out of the opposite window and sees nothing but rolling plains. 'Country flat and monotonous,' he writes down. That applies to all of us, doesn't it?"

Madame Boisragon smiled a little vaguely.

"I don't believe they could have been very intelligent correspondents," she said in a listless way, "otherwise they would not have been so stupid as to look out of one window only."

"But," argued Peter Kerr, merely for the sake of argument, "it is exactly what we have just been doing. People are always looking out of their own little windows, and not troubling about any others. Perhaps Jules Verne meant that as the text for a sermon."

Madame Boisragon scrutinized him in a manner which seemed to suggest that he had been too subtle. Kerr felt suddenly disappointed with her—perhaps she was really stupid.

"How curious you English are," she remarked. "You are not afraid to start a serious discussion at seven in the morning—even with a woman!"

Kerr laughed a little perfunctorily.

"I confess it is pretty bad—for seven in the morning," he rejoined. "Still, I promise not to do it any more, if that gives you any comfort. From now on I shall agree absolutely with all you say."

Madame Boisragon was thoughtfully picking a blade of grass to pieces when she next spoke.

"That is very rash of you: I may give you cause to repent," she said slowly.

"Nobody should ever repent," said Kerr, as if he were

stating an important truth. "It is a sign of weakness—in grown-up people, at least."

"Of weakness?" There was a sudden curiosity in her voice. "How can you say that?"

"It is very simple," he replied smilingly, having from the first made up his mind what it was to lead up to. "If one wants to do a thing badly enough, one does it deliberately. That is the first part, is it not? Then after a time one's conscience pricks one and one becomes repentant. That is the second part. And why is this so? Because fear has taken the place of desire, and in order to escape, if possible, the consequences of one's deliberate acts, one becomes repentant. Therefore to be repentant is a sign of weakness. Do you see what I mean? For instance, if I made love to you, no matter what the consequences of that rash act might be, I should never repent it!" He tried to catch her eyes, but as he looked she turned away.

"That is also stupid," she answered, slowly beginning to tear another blade of grass to pieces, "for seven in the morning."

"Perhaps," murmured Peter Kerr, taking off his sun-helmet and staring at the little group of ponies busily engaged in cropping the scanty grass some distance away from them. In a puddle quite close to them, a magpie, deluded into a sense of complete security by the quiet which reigned, was taking a bath with a great fuss and fluttering of wings. The morning was wonderfully peaceful, and Kerr breathed in the fresh, crisp air with sudden enjoyment. It seemed good to live.

"You have become very silent," said Madame Boisragon at last, looking at him with a faint smile playing round the corners of her mouth.

"You have made me cautious," he replied at once, as if he had been waiting for that. "I am afraid now not only of a discussion but of a fight as well."

"Do I look so very combative, then?"

Peter Kerr turned his head slowly and studied her carefully.

"No," he said at last with decision. "You don't at all—no, on the contrary, you look——" He stopped on purpose. There was danger in his eyes, though his lips smiled.

"I cannot possibly tell what I look like to you," suggested Madame Boisragon incautiously.

"That means that I will have to say it," he laughed. "Well, I will tell you what I think. If you were dressed for it you would make a model nun—with your eyes cast down and humility on your lips. You have the features—the look—and you have almost the habit, one might say——"

She stopped him with a sudden flick of her riding-whip; but the colour had for some reason crept into her cheeks, and once again he was convinced that she was pretty.

"How can you talk such nonsense?" she exclaimed energetically, as if she disliked the comparison. "I assure you I would make a very poor nun indeed."

Kerr shook his head incredulously.

"A nun is always a dangerous character—when she is out of her convent," he continued facetiously, persisting in his attitude. "You had best beware."

With an impatient little gesture, as if she were annoyed, Madame Boisragon suddenly stood up and began to tie down her veil as a protection against the dust.

"How stupid we are," she said abruptly. "We are allowing the fresh morning to slip away whilst we sit here talking absurdities. It is a great mistake, believe me. Let us ride."

She moved off towards the ponies, calling to the men to make ready. Peter Kerr followed slowly, whistling softly to himself and cutting at some reeds with his whip. He could not make up his mind entirely whether he liked her or not. There was something which he could not explain—something which aroused his opposition. He wondered what it was in her that baffled him. Each time he had seen her it had appeared; and to-day, for some reason, it was there stronger than ever.

CHAPTER XII

"A l'œuvre on connait l'artisan."—LA FONTAINE.

PETER KERR soon had an opportunity to see that Lorenzo was really a remarkable man in his own peculiar way. He believed he had done well to enlist his services. Lorenzo indeed was one of those who fully grasped what so few people in the world really understand: that in affairs of importance the essence matters and the forms do not count at all. This is the very soul of sound strategy—strategy being merely the right line of advance. Yet convention has eaten so deep into the soul of man that generally he now sees salvation only in officialdom and printed forms—that is, in the reputed help of others—and begins to disbelieve in his own capacity, which is singularly foolish and utterly unheroic.

A very few days after Kerr's regulation papers had been filed at the Government Boards concerned with such business, Lorenzo had arranged for a most important interview with an old Manchu Prince who wielded untold power behind the scenes, and who was reputed to have become fabulously rich by making himself a convenient channel between Europeans who desired special privileges in China, and the Central Government, which, in spite of all the lessons it had received in the past, still remained openly obstructionist. Lorenzo explained volubly to Kerr that, for instance, the Board of Foreign Affairs would be very polite, would be very accommodating, would be everything mortal man might desire; but that until wheels had been set working behind the scenes there would be absolutely no business possible, no matter how ably he might argue his case or how much open pressure he might bring to bear. The beginning and end of Chinese diplomacy was to pro-

crastinate—to put off, to delay; and likewise the beginning, the middle, and the end of his work would merely be to fight those tactics. That was the problem in a nutshell; and he would show him the only way to find the true solution.

How the Italian had been able to become so intimate with the secret springs of power in Peking, no one exactly knew. But that he did know what he was talking about was certainly a fact. He never forgot, for instance, that the real masters here were the Manchus, and that to produce any really abiding results in China it was necessary to reach the highest among these men and to secure their support. Their lips alone could pronounce the magic "Open sesame" which made officials nominally in complete charge of affairs suddenly throw open wide the portals of their bureaus and really welcome the stranger; and until their lips had spoken, all was in vain.

Lorenzo's methods were radically different from those generally followed. The policy of haunting a Legation and imploring help in order to forward any particular scheme had always appeared absurd to him. In view of what Chinese diplomacy really was, such an attitude seemed the negation of common sense. He would win by his own wits, he said, and not with the doubtful aid of the thick stick, which has never been of any real use in China, since what is unwillingly extorted sooner or later inevitably suffers from whole-hearted obstruction. Consequently, because he held such independent views, because he acted so independently, Lorenzo was highly unpopular and every one invented absurd stories about him. People do not like men to have too many ideas of their own—especially in small official communities. To have original ideas is eminently suspicious, since one can never be quite sure what those ideas may be or how much success may crown them. And then nothing is quite so irritating as other people's successes.

Lorenzo fortunately cared little for appearances, or for other people's opinions. He went his own way contentedly,

quite contentedly. He had concentrated his entire efforts during weary months on the sole business of convincing a few high personages, who understood very little about such things, that the issuance to him of a small piece of paper, stamped with the great Imperial Seal of China, was a matter of paramount importance both to the welfare of the empire and to the personages concerned. He had already succeeded so well in his own venture that he possessed pledges making the issuance of that final piece of all-important paper a mere matter of time. When he had obtained it stock-exchanges would eagerly welcome him; and that was all he really cared about.

On the day on which this particular interview had been arranged, he stood in the hall of the little hotel talking to Kerr of these things in a rambling way. He did not tell him very much, of course, since that would have been against his policy. Still, he was reasonably communicative, and really interesting. Peter Kerr had long realized how different was the entire problem from anything he had imagined before he had come to China. Then it had seemed to him that his scheme, embodying as it did every possible advantage, would be something which could be made highly acceptable to a government which had hitherto been treated with scant courtesy. Now it was quite plain to him that years would have to elapse before this government, which he had once pictured to himself as something approximating a European government, could possibly be educated up to the exigencies of the hour and see these good points. This government was now mainly engaged in making the best compromises it could with the insistent demands coming from all sides—always hoping that if saving clauses were inserted in every contract and agreement which might be signed, sealed, and delivered, the whirligig of time, aided by a policy of passive resistance, might ultimately allow matters to revert to their pristine state. This Chinese government was therefore in no mood for grand reconstructive

measures. It was nervous about its own fate, and at heart it cared nothing really for regeneration, about which many people were speaking.

And slowly but surely this nervousness was spreading ever farther afield—spreading from Peking to the provinces. Russia, having obtained what she wanted by a mixed policy of bluff and alleged friendship, was beginning to show her claws. Germany was not far behind; and there were constant rumours that all the Powers would soon be acting in much the same way all over China. It looked as if a period of storm and stress was beginning—a period which everybody professed to be afraid of—but nevertheless which everybody was hurrying along.

There was something very remarkable in Peter Kerr's eyes in this little official European colony which was planted in the very heart of a barbarous old-world capital, and which was bringing on by its manifold activities complication after complication, each of which was only solved by giving birth to yet other complications, which in turn would contribute perceptibly towards making the cracks in the ancient Chinese edifice wider and wider. There was a sort of careless insolence about it all which was somehow reminiscent of the symptoms before the old English rebellion, the American Revolution, the French Revolution. Something was slowly pushing things along in the wrong direction; something was perpetually disclosing that it could not go on forever like this. It was politically monstrous to suppose that a scramble similar to the scramble which had taken place in Africa could occur in this vast empire without great bloodshed and unending trouble. The Chinese were not Kaffirs or Negroes; they were a remarkably astute people, whose military weakness was simply being taken advantage of somewhat unblushingly, and yet who, when they thoroughly understood what all this meant, would probably attempt to bring about surprising developments.

Peter Kerr, as he listened to Lorenzo, saw how clever was his policy of slipping in modestly through back doors

and accomplishing his purpose, whilst the glamour of greater doings kept most people's attention away from him. He had no doubt at all that Lorenzo would succeed in his own particular venture before the tide turned. The many others, with their "copies of memoranda exchanged," their "preliminary agreements," and all those other adjuncts to international finance and cosmopolitan industrialism, would be waiting and intriguing and fretting at the delays imposed on them by their Legations, because national projects must take precedence of private projects, whilst Lorenzo, with the life-buoy of an unreversible Imperial Decree securely attached to him, would be swimming far away down the stream of success.

Just then Carnot entered the hall with a very important and mysterious air. His habitually cadaverous face was deeply flushed and he looked excited. He took off his sun-helmet, wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and then called loudly. A pair of slumbering servants in their long blue coats started up and hurried towards him. To one he threw his sun-helmet; to the other he called for a whisky and soda. Then he turned to the two men.

"Good-morning," he began in his cavernous voice, first glancing round to see that there was no one else near. "I have just heard a little piece of news—absolutely confidential. I can only whisper it to you. The old lady in the Palace there"—he jerked his head in the direction of the Forbidden City—"is going to order up a horde of troops who will be camped near Peking. I can guarantee that it is true. I heard it an hour ago from an old friend of mine, a eunuch in the Palace—a fat fellow who likes champagne and who procures curios for me. What do you think of that? A whole horde of troops! That means that something big—something very big—is anticipated."

He nodded his head pensively, and continued to wipe his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"Anyway," he ended, as if some one had been arguing with him, "the news is on its way home. It will give them

something to think about in Europe just now, I warrant you. They do not begin to understand what is going on here."

Just then somebody pushed open the hall doors and peered in; and for a moment there was impressed on the three men standing there silently a bright sunlit vision of the endless tide of men, animals, and carts sweeping noisily down the street enveloped in billows of dust. Then the doors swung to suddenly with a bang, shutting out this alien world and confining it to its own limits.

The motion seemed to arouse Lorenzo. He shrugged his shoulders in a characteristic manner, and his features, which had shown signs of surprise, quickly resumed their usual half cynical expression.

"It will not come yet," he said in a final fashion. "It will not come yet," he repeated.

"What will not come?" asked Kerr bluntly.

The Italian laughed sarcastically and answered with a general explanation.

"The trouble," he said with an expansive gesture, "is, as I have already explained, you and me and our governments. We are all greedy, very greedy—and some day there must be a great surprise. Can you blame the Chinese? That is all. To show how it is beginning to hurt, they begin to move troops. But their troops are a farce—just now at least. I was for six months in a savage province at the back doors of the empire, and I saw something of them repressing a rebellion. It was not nice—but against us, against our men, it would be nothing——"

He stopped abruptly and looked at Carnot. But Carnot disagreed.

"Yes," he grumbled, "but how about the Palace?—how about that? It is plain you do not know that side of the question properly. The old woman is getting restive, and the young Emperor is commencing to have ideas—that is the real problem just now—two people who do not agree. You do not understand that."

"Oh," rejoined Lorenzo, "you cannot frighten me with

that, my friend. They can fight in their Palace as much as they like: it will not hurt us."

Yet his looks somehow belied his words. Lorenzo was as fully alive as any one to the larger outlines of a problem in which he was personally interested only in an infinitesimal portion. He knew that the very weakness of the Throne was in a large measure its greatest strength; for that weakness was attributed by the common people to foreign aggression—and the Manchus would know how to make that idea a pivot on which to swing things the way they desired. Some *coup d'état,* some Palace revolution, the details of which would never be properly known to the world, might, however, suddenly introduce a factor with which even his supple dynamics would be unable to contend. He needed a few weeks' more time—that he frequently confessed—before he would be out of the woods. He must have his Imperial Edict; and if the Court began playing strange pranks, there might be no more Edicts for the foreigner.

Something of these things showed themselves on Lorenzo's mobile features as he stood silently in the primitive little hall with the other two men; and as a piano sounded suddenly on the floor above them, he started with manifest irritation.

"I wish, Carnot," he said, "you would beat a few of your carters. We have been waiting here for half an hour, and they have not come yet."

He walked impatiently to the hall doors and flung them open again to see if the carts were there; and Kerr, who had followed his movements with his eyes, felt a flush rise to his face as he saw him suddenly change his attitude and step aside with a low bow.

A lady had appeared. She began shutting her parasol as she entered the hall, and for a moment Kerr could not see who it was. Then, as the parasol dropped to the ground, his instinctive feeling was proved correct. It was Madame Boisragon.

Kerr went forward to meet her.

"Good-morning," he said agreeably, wondering why he should have been so prompt. He felt that the two men were watching him closely, and the thought annoyed him sharply.

"Did you not find it very hot on the street?" he continued. He saw that Madame Boisragon's pale face had become a little pink through the white veil she was wearing. He felt instinctively that she was angry with him—perhaps because he had accosted her in the public hall instead of letting her pass with a bow. Yet he could not understand why that should be so.

"It is certainly very hot out in the sun," she said a little coldly. "I cannot advise a walk for pleasure at this hour."

She looked past him at the stairs. She was plainly waiting for him to move.

"I beg your pardon," he said, stepping aside as if he had suddenly become alive to the fact. "I am afraid I have kept you."

She murmured a brief reply and passed on. He watched her gather up her skirts and mount the stairs with a feeling of curious disappointment and discontent. He had made a mistake in speaking, he now felt sure.

"Come on, Kerr," called Lorenzo from the hall doors; and Kerr, hastily putting on his hat and picking up his stick and his rolls of papers, followed him out of the hotel. Carnot had already disappeared.

"I did not know you knew that lady," said Lorenzo with abrupt directness, as they stood for an instant together beside the carts. He looked suspiciously at the Englishman.

"I met her the other night at one of the Legations," answered Kerr with feigned indifference. He resented the Italian's curiosity; but for that very reason he was strictly on his guard.

Lorenzo folded his arms behind his back and moistened his lips. Undoubtedly he was in a bad humour.

"I asked that question," he began, "because I suppose you

do not know who the husband is. He is the secret agent of the group who are trying to secure a large portion of the very concession you are seeking. He is therefore a rival, and I may tell you that these people for whom he is acting are not only trying very hard to get what they want, but that they have twice almost succeeded in accomplishing their object. Do you understand?—almost succeeded. There is, however, something not quite right with them at the other end—in Europe, I mean—and that is what has prevented them each time from closing a definite contract. The husband is a man who has been used everywhere—in Africa, in South America, in Indo-China. He is very capable. But there is this home difficulty which crops up when the usual guarantees are demanded. The guarantees asked for are enormous. From what I have gathered this difficulty may be got over at any moment, and then, unless we have introduced a new factor into this problem, the question of your scheme will be irrevocably decided. I hope I have made myself clear?"

"Certainly," began Kerr, "but still I don't see——"

Lorenzo smiled sarcastically.

"You don't know this place and these transactions," he interrupted. "Anything may matter. You might be betrayed into an indiscretion which would give a clue to that man Boisragon as to what you were doing. Do you suppose that you are not being watched by a dozen people?"

A new light broke on Peter Kerr.

"Watched?" he inquired, a little amazed. "Why should I be watched?"

Lorenzo expostulated with his arm.

"As well inquire why the sun is shining! You are watched for very obvious reasons. If you think for a minute, you will see that your presence here must alone have furnished a great deal of food for conversation. People here have nothing to do but to talk—and intrigue. As the bank agents necessarily know everything about people empowered to draw large sums of money, they can furnish one another with

financial details. As for the general details, I tell you frankly that I can give you the names of the places in the interior where your surveyors are at present. I learnt that at the Club yesterday. Well, what do you think of that? It does not take a genius, then, to work out roughly from such indications what you are trying for. There are only two points which can possibly remain obscure: first, what your exact scheme may be—that is, how you propose to make it acceptable to the Chinese government; and second, how much financial backing you can count on so as to beat all competitors. And those are exactly the two points which at all costs must be kept secret."

Lorenzo abruptly ended his little lecture by entering his Peking cart. Kerr silently climbed into the second one, whilst their two interpreters mounted the third.

He would have liked to have discussed the matter a little further; but he refrained. He knew that Lorenzo would become very uncommunicative directly he imagined that an attempt was being made to exploit his one great asset—his fertile and well-stored brain. The morning's news had evidently impressed the Italian a great deal. Possibilities which he did not like to contemplate were drawing nearer and nearer; and this, taken in conjunction with the last surprise which Kerr had given him, had completed his vexation. His outburst of frankness had really been an explosion of temper.

All the way along the great thoroughfares they were soon threading, their ears filled with the unending rattle-clatter of the immensely heavy wheels grinding on the thick axletrees, Peter Kerr pondered on the extraordinary difficulties which now surrounded him. From a technical and financial point of view things were much the same, he felt convinced, as the day he had expounded them to Sir James Barker and his associates. Yet in spite of this he felt that he might almost as well have prepared a giant scheme for the reform of the currency of the country; or for giving

the rulers a conscript army of five million men; or for effecting some other great and comprehensive reform. Perhaps if he had come a few years earlier, when the close of the disastrous war with Japan had left the rulers with a real desire to inaugurate measures which would restore them to their pristine glory—perhaps at such a rare psychological moment he would have been welcomed with open arms and have brought off a coup which would have been forever famous in the annals of railway enterprise. As it now was, the field was not only overcrowded, but had been actually so worked over so often that it was littered with the remains of abortive schemes. Other men had almost exactly the same ideas as he had. Their schemes may have lacked something of the finish of his; but still they had embodied the main ideas—and that was what made him angry. Probably in the end in China there would be the same muddle as in India. If only he could explain that. If only——

The line of carts, travelling one behind the other in Indian file, came to such a sudden halt that each mule cannoned with its head into the hood of the vehicle in front, and the thread of Kerr's thoughts was thus effectively snapped. Confused shouts apprised him that something untoward had occurred, and so, sliding forward from the uncomfortable crouching position which the old-fashioned Peking cart necessitated, he jumped to the ground and walked inquiringly up to the leading cart in which was Lorenzo.

A fast-collecting, blue-coated crowd, sucked up quickly from the passing throng as a sponge sucks up water, made it necessary for him to shoulder his way roughly forward. Instead of yielding readily to his pressure, as was generally the case with these easy-going natives, Kerr divined in the sullen manner in which they now gave way, something ominous.

He was not wrong. Lorenzo was still sitting on the shafts of his cart just as he had started, but his hat was now off and he was pressing to his face a blue silk handkerchief, which was rapidly becoming an unseemly red-black.

Kerr saw at once that he was bleeding badly. Unceremoniously he kicked the nearest of the crowd back.

"What the devil's happened, Lorenzo?" he inquired anxiously, pulling out his own handkerchief and handing it to the Italian. "Who hit you? Can you point out the man?"

The Italian, before answering, finished mopping away the blood. Then he picked up a jagged stone which had fallen into the cart and showed it to Kerr. His lips, nose, and cheeks had been sharply cut.

"It is nothing," he said in jerks, spitting the blood from his mouth, "a little cut, a little blood, and that is all. I have had it worse before—in Egypt, in Siam."

He finished wiping his face carefully without adding anything further. There was something in his simple acceptance of a disagreeable fact and his quietness which oddly affected the Englishman.

"I am really awfully sorry, Lorenzo," he began. "It is on my business, too. I wish it had been me instead of you. Damn you!" He turned fiercely on the crowd again, and scattered them like chaff.

A strange expression suddenly crossed the Italian's face; it was as if some forgotten chord had been touched. He looked steadily at his companion with his keen black eyes over his blood-stained handkerchief.

"I will not forget what you have said, Kerr," he replied quietly. "But the blow—is nothing. It is part of the price to be paid for extorting success from unwilling elements. Look at them," he exclaimed a trifle melodramatically, "and do not be surprised."

He waved his hand round at the mass of inquisitive brown faces now peering at the scene from a safe middle distance. Farther down on either side of the great thoroughfare, other hundreds had been lured to a stop by the commotion on the central driving-road. The curious barbaric-looking shops, with their immense sign-posts of gold and red and black and their fantastic irregular fronts, seemed likewise

full of people in an attitude of suspense. Everything had stopped—for an instant. It suddenly seemed to Peter Kerr once more like a scene in a theatre.

Lorenzo, having stopped the bleeding at last, put on his hat. The two interpreters, nervous and pale with anxiety at this unexpected incident, were busily questioning the carter. The carter protested complete ignorance; a stone had been thrown and had hit the foreign gentleman—that was all he knew. Let them strike him dead if he knew more. Who could tell who had thrown it? Look at the number of people in the street——

The Italian cut short the interpreters with some harshness. It was the first irritation he had shown.

"Mr. Liang and Mr. Chun," he said, addressing the two men by name, "we have had enough of this thing. On no account do I wish you to mention it. I cut my face by falling from my cart—do you understand? By falling from my cart. Not a word to any one. Now push on."

The carters chirruped to their mules, and the buzz and murmur of excitement were soon left behind. As Lorenzo had said, these things were part of the price paid for extorting success from unwilling elements; it was merely foolish to repine.

For Lorenzo, that singular man had already forgotten the incident as far as its personal application was concerned. As he sat in his cart, he was trying to connect it with the alleged news Carnot had obtained from the Palace by means of his friend the eunuch. Lorenzo knew Asia and Africa sufficiently well to understand that there is a close and subtle connection between all events—large and small, important and unimportant. Was there anything in the incident or not?—that was what was worrying him. If he could have learnt definitely he would have suffered many worse blows.

CHAPTER XIII

"Il n'y a point de patrie dans le despotique; d'autres choses y suppléent, l'intéret, la gloire, le service du prince."—LA BRUYÈRE.

THE interview with the high Manchu Prince was, on the whole, a great success. Lorenzo, who was an expert in such matters, pronounced himself quite satisfied. He even said that they had had remarkable luck. Whether subtle movements were in process of incubation or not in the capital, it was immediately made quite plain to the two men that this Peking dignitary deemed the times singularly propitious to add a little more money to his stores of treasure; and accordingly he was very gracious and very helpful in his attitude.

Peter Kerr had at once forgotten the many sensations of the morning in the interest which was excited in him as soon as they had driven into the first immense stone-flagged courtyard—a courtyard full of retainers and impressive in a very peculiar way. This courtyard was shut off from the bustle of the plebeian world by great barred gates, painted red and made of the most massive timbers. Beside the gates watched the usual Gargantuan stone lions, a ludicrous contentment overspreading their fat features, whilst *chevaux-de-frises* were so ranged between them that only one cart could drive in at a time. Green trees, possessing great branches and gnarled trunks to attest their old age, imparted a pleasant air of coolness and restfulness to the Palace grounds. The trees were mostly arranged in avenues, after the seigneurial fashion of the capital; but some of the noblest stood in pleasant groves, shading wells or lending additional beauty to artistic little pavilions which crowned artificial hillocks, where doubtless the inmates took the air on hot

summer evenings. There was, above all, in these courtyards an air of spaciousness and dignity—the subtle imprint of the habit of commanding, of being paid attention to—which seemed, by contrast with the rest of the rude and rough capital, to belong to far-off days; days when the Eight Iron-capped Princes and the Eight Banners and the Red Girdles and the Yellow Girdles were living, vital facts—that is, when the ruling Manchu clan was really mighty and feared not only in this Chinese land, which lay captive to their spear and bow, but in the outer world as well—the world designated in all sincerity by them as the world of outer barbarians, because China was the very centre—the Middle Kingdom—the hub of civilization and culture; and because from great China it was manifestly child's play to proceed to the conquest of the world, as Genghis Khan had done.

In this first great outer courtyard of this prince, shut off by the big stately gates and the immensely high walls from the roaring, vulgar throngs of the streets, it was easy to understand the old-world arrogance which still existed in high quarters in Peking in spite of the great changes which had come. The very phrasing of the Imperial Decrees—a phrasing imitated by the Manchu princes and copied again once more by their henchmen in their minor acts, calling upon one and all, when orders were given, to "tremble and obey"—was indicative of this inherited pride springing from a belief in an inalienable superiority. The pride—offspring of this belief—was a very old thing, and was held, so to speak, by prescription—that is, by a custom continued until it had become a right and had the force of law. It mattered not that this right had been really usurped less than three centuries before, when the conquest of China had suddenly turned a warlike and barbarian Manchurian tribe into a ruling race. By a polite fiction this break in Chinese Imperial History was so obscured as to enable the Manchus to assume the prerogatives of haughtiness and exclusiveness which had surrounded the Dragon Throne and its imme-

diate adherents for thirty long centuries. The Manchus were the Great Moguls of China. The glory of Chinese culture and civilization had passed like a cloak from the shoulders of the expiring Ming dynasty to the shoulders of the new dynasty when they had usurped the Throne; and the new dynasty, being essentially a military dynasty, had understood well the expediency of sharing this glory with its newly created princes, its countless relatives, and its faithful soldiery. Thus a caste had been created really as distinctive as the ruling English caste in India, yet without the grave limitation of a colour difference. And in this way Peking had been given an Imperialism more highly specialized than any known since the days when Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, had founded in the thirteenth century his entrenched city of Cambaluc, or Peking, in which his roving Mongol hordes might dwell forever in peace.

Peter Kerr could not help thinking of all this marvellous history after they had climbed out of their carts and stood waiting until they should be ceremoniously ushered into the presence of the great man himself. Having purposely allowed a few minutes to go by in this uncomfortable waiting, the *t'ing ch'ai,* or official servants, had at last raised the great red Chinese visiting-cards high up above their heads in the manner which politeness dictates; and holding them thus, they had led the party in a compact body through a second smaller gate, which had long, low outhouses furnished with latticed windows extending far along on either side of it. Peter Kerr had noticed that through these latticed windows dozens of curious eyes were peeping at them; for the Prince, like other powerful Manchus, dwelt as the barons of old—that is, with his own people garrisoning his castle, and securing him against all possible dangers.

In the second or smaller courtyard, into which they were now ushered, they had seen several red Imperial carts, with the wheels set far back instead of under the body of the

cart—vehicles which in spite of their clumsiness were somehow peculiarly distinguished in aspect. These carts were backed right into a circular side entrance, and retainers with collapsible screens of red cloth in their hands stood ready to cut off the carts from all view. The interpreters had whispered that some of the Prince's womenfolk were evidently going out, and that only the very greatest in the land possessed the privilege of these red screens. Even on the streets retainers paced beside the carts and carried these red screens folded in their hands. Immediately the outriders ahead caught sight of other princely friends or acquaintances, the retainers were called to and hoisted the red screens and shrouded the carts. Otherwise it would be necessary for the oncoming cortège to stop and the friends or acquaintances to descend from their carts and pay their respects in the dust of the thoroughfare. The fiction of the red screens saved them from that. Such were some of the privileges of high rank in this clime!

Thereafter the little party had entered the first building, only to find themselves in a great *ting' erh,* or hall, unfurnished save for a few carved blackwood seats and couches. They had been bidden to wait there for a while—doubtless to add a little more to the impressiveness of their visit—and finally they had been ushered into the presence of the Prince himself, who was a fine old dignified man, clad in a simple silk robe, and possessed of those perfect manners which can only be cultivated in peace and seclusion.

It was plain that the words which had reached him in advance had dwelt with much insistence on the richness of the man who had come ten thousand miles in quest of a railway El Dorado. His attitude seemed to imply that at once. Whilst they were drinking the preliminary tea, Peter Kerr had been much amused at the amazing deference of their interpreters. Literally indeed did they tremble and obey! Almost before the Prince had finished speaking they were stammering their polished replies. Yet through all this necessary prologue Lorenzo preserved a matter-of-

fact and undemonstrative attitude, which showed that he was well used to such interviews and little impressed by those measured preliminaries which are apt to affect newcomers. Lorenzo was simply waiting for the business of the day to commence—he showed it in his manner; it would not be very long delayed, he knew, as the Prince, in spite of his good manners, would be eager to know what good fortune he might count on.

Lorenzo was not wrong. Very soon the Prince motioned to his servants to withdraw. And not only did he do this, but he carefully followed them with his eyes in a singular manner to see that they did not remain within earshot. Having satisfied himself that they were at last really alone, he turned his head abruptly and asked in a changed voice how he could be of use.

Lorenzo began the talking, as he proposed reserving Kerr for the technicalities. The Italian very slowly and very plainly explained that the only thing they required was an impartial hearing at the hands of the Government Board concerned. If they had that they were convinced that the Chinese government could not favour any other scheme than theirs. Their scheme was, briefly, to undertake to build and equip some six thousand miles of railway so designed that all the important centres of the empire would be linked up for a specific sum per mile; they would fully equip the lines on another basis—that is, having due regard for possible traffic requirements; and last of all, they would contract to raise all the necessary loans at a fixed issue-price, a fixed rate of interest, and a fixed commission. All China would have to do was to sanction the scheme by Imperial Decree and to agree that a Railway Commission including two or three European experts would sit in Peking until one half of the total loans had been paid back. The bondholders would be protected by a mortgage of the lines in question; and the loans would be for a period of fifty years, to be extinguished in forty repayments, beginning in the eleventh year after the beginning of their construc-

tion. No foreign control of the lines was required at all; the only thing that was stipulated was that two or three European experts should be included in the Railway Commission, so as to give confidence to the investing public.

With the Prince listening attentively, the Italian repeated these proposals three times, and after the third time he drew from a black portfolio half a dozen copies in Chinese of these various points and tendered them to the Prince with a deferential bow.

"Tell His Highness," he said finally to the interpreters, "that we are placing ourselves entirely in his hands. If these details were known to our rivals we would be lost."

The Prince listened and immediately smiled reassuringly.

"Tell these gentlemen," he said in reply, "that I have in my hands many secrets which if they were known would cost me far more than this one secret would cost them."

He folded the memoranda given him in a small bundle and slipped them under his girdle. It was plain that in spite of his exquisite manners he could be most businesslike.

"Now, Kerr," said Lorenzo, "it is your turn with the plans."

Kerr spread out on his knees a dozen rolls of drawing-paper, on which he had laboured many hours in company with his interpreters, carrying out as clearly as possible the Italian's suggestion to produce something simple with Chinese explanations filled in. What he had done was very effective.

First he handed the Prince what looked something like an admiralty chart in Chinese. The natural features of the country, however, were all neatly filled in, and over the whole was boldly traced in double red lines the railway system which they proposed to build. This was the key to the dozen detailed plans which followed—each separate plan treating as clearly as possible, after an ingenious system suggested by Lorenzo, a separate section of the railway network. After going over the ground carefully several times just as Lorenzo had done, Kerr showed finally how

all the detailed plans could be clamped together making one well-arranged whole. The Prince smiled in satisfaction at the ingenuity which had been displayed.

"Tell these gentlemen," he said once more to the interpreters, "that this is all more satisfactory and clearer than anything I have seen. They have been very intelligent." It was quite plain that he understood.

For the first time during the interview, Lorenzo smiled genially. He was becoming satisfied. Kerr noticed that as he smiled the ugly cut on his lip was disclosed. It seemed to give something ominous to his smile, as if he would one day ask and enforce payment for the hurt. But the Italian's mind was still plainly concentrated on the business of the day—his wound could wait—he had indeed forgotten it.

"We are very pleased," he said slowly, "that the Prince has been so kind to us. We are afraid that we have taken up too much of his time, and we would only like to ask him how soon it will be possible to convey to us a message." That was what Lorenzo said.

The expression of the Prince's face, hitherto so alert and so intelligent, suddenly changed. A blankness overspread his features which was a masterpiece of acting. He spread out his delicate hands as if the problem which he had been given to solve was so difficult that he could not possibly commit himself just now. Words flowed from his lips so smoothly and so fast that the interpreters had difficulty even in following with a garbled version.

Lorenzo suddenly interrupted it all by standing up and giving a nod to Kerr.

"Mr. Liang and Mr. Chun," he said abruptly to the interpreters, "will you just glance out of the doors and see if you can find any trace of our carts?"

The interpreters bowed themselves away.

"Now, Kerr," said Lorenzo.

Kerr, not without some embarrassment, drew an envelope

from his pocket and handed it to the Prince with some unintelligible words. It was the first time he had ever adapted himself to these new business requirements, and frankly he did not like it. But Lorenzo had been inexorable. Either he must follow the proper course or pack his trunks and go home—that was what Lorenzo had told him repeatedly. And that was the reason why this envelope appeared.

The Prince, however, showed no such embarrassment as Peter Kerr. With studied deliberation he opened the envelope and drew forth the cheque Kerr had placed inside. He scrutinized the figures carefully, and Lorenzo, who knew sufficient of the vernacular for that, explained to him that it was an order for English gold pounds.

The Prince lost himself in smiles and protests. It was impossible to know what he did not say. Lorenzo, following up his advantage, partly by signs and partly by the use of his small vocabulary, now sought to impress upon the Prince the excellence of the project submitted to his care. To do this he thumped the plans and repeated again and again a few set phrases.

The Prince nodded back approvingly and shook his head affirmatively. Then, with a sudden movement he stooped down and placed the envelope in his cloth boot.

The thing was over.

"Have you seen the carts?" called Lorenzo significantly to the interpreters. "If so, you can come back."

The interpreters, who had been standing far away turning their backs towards the little comedy, wheeled at once and returned. From the blank expression on their faces it was plain that nobody with any good taste ever understands things not concerning them.

"The carts should be ready by now," remarked one of them blandly.

"Then we must go," replied Lorenzo. Intimacy being now discreetly banished, they began saying farewell to the Prince with the greatest ceremony. They thanked him for

having listened to them; they thanked him for his support, which they now ventured to assume was assured; they begged the interpreters to convey the most fervid expressions of their great esteem. Then Lorenzo suddenly stopped and changed his manner. It was very prettily done.

"I wish," he said, "to impress one last thing on the Prince. The Syndicate we mainly fear is a French group who have doubtless submitted their estimates in francs. Now perhaps compared with these estimates our figures may seem high; but then the English gold pound is worth twenty-five times the value of the franc, and all our calculations and payments are made in these gold pounds. Does the Prince understand that?"

The interpreters explained volubly for a few seconds; and at once a winning and comprehending smile broke over the Prince's face.

"I understand fully the value of the gold pound," he said reassuringly, and with that, begging him not to accompany them to the gates as politeness bound him to do, they finally said the last good-bye. The servants flung doors wide open —there was a babel of words—it was now absolutely finished.

"There is no such ceremony out here," remarked Lorenzo a few minutes later, as, surrounded by the Palace servants, they prepared to mount their carts. He now drew from his pockets several heavy rolls of silver dollars, and breaking the wrappers, he began distributing the money with the utmost phlegm among the servants, who, as is customary, bobbed their right knee in the Manchu way, then stood stiffly at attention, with their arms beside them, and thanked their donor in formal tones. There seemed no end to these people; and yet Lorenzo had enough money to give to each the proper sum.

"This is called gate-money," he explained when he had finished to Kerr, who was watching him with a rather grim smile. "And the next time you come you will notice all

the difference in the world. It is amiable custom founded on a proper understanding of human nature."

It was with a very large and imposing crowd of bowing servants watching them that they at length drove out of the stately gates over which watched the dignified stone lions.

Lorenzo certainly understood his business.

CHAPTER XIV

"De loin c'est quelque chose, et de près ce n'est rien."—LA FONTAINE.

IF Kerr had hoped that anything sensational was destined to occur after these events, he was doomed to signal disappointment. Days went by in quietness and utter uneventfulness. Lorenzo, now sitting permanently at the same table as himself in the little hotel dining-room, had become more enigmatical and more silent than was his wont. Though he still professed to be satisfied with the general prospects of success, he now frankly announced that more time was necessary than he had thought would be the case, even to complete his own nearly completed scheme. New elements had been interjected into the problem; these would have to become either dissipated or modified by the flux of time —or perhaps boldly attacked—and any one who supposed that energy would be of use in this strange capital was a fool ignorant of the real motive forces of the East.

The subtle Italian, as he ate and drank, lectured the Englishman in odd little snatches, full of wisdom and strange deductions, full of marvellous knowledge of men and their weaknesses; and though once or twice the suspicion may have crossed Kerr's mind that Lorenzo was employing him for his own special purposes, he very soon banished such ideas. Kerr had to recognize that whether he left the capital or not, Lorenzo's plans would be but little affected. He would be hard put, perhaps, for ready cash, but then his credit was good. Kerr had been careful to obtain independent corroboration of all Lorenzo's statements. The Italian, he found, was quite truthful when he said that he had almost succeeded with his own particular venture, and that for him it had merely become a question of sitting still

and patiently waiting. Provided a revolution did not come, it was as morally certain as anything in this world could be that the Italian's concession would be a *fait accompli,* duly sanctioned by Edict, and therefore marketable and as good as gold in the pocket.

Kerr had already communicated with Sir James Barker on Lorenzo's account, duly forwarding his undertaking that a definite portion of the share capital, to be raised to work this proposed mining concession, would be set apart for the handling of Kerr's own friends and sponsors. By this not only would there be an opportunity of recovering the sums which the Italian had borrowed, but of securing handsome profits as well. China being an almost unexploited field, and her reserves of wealth hidden in the earth having been well established by the researches of scientists, it was certain that on the launching of any sound mining scheme the public would rush into the market and thus enable the underwriters—and their nearly-related brethren, "the stags" —to reap a golden harvest. Kerr, therefore, could afford to congratulate himself on his decision in promptly accepting the advances Lorenzo had first made. The Italian had become to him a species of collateral security; if his own railway scheme came to naught, not so very much would be lost provided his ally was entirely successful.

Still, though this was so, Kerr frankly confessed to himself that he did not understand the peculiar mental process through which the Italian appeared to be going. It seemed strange, indeed almost ominous, that he should become infected with such moroseness when nothing warranted anything but an attitude of expectancy. Perhaps it was that owing to the secret nervous strain which he had endured for so many long months, the mere fact that success was so near at hand caused him to suffer from the inevitable mental relapse. For not only had Lorenzo passed through this strange period of waiting in Peking, but previous to this he had hidden himself far away in the capital of the distant province he proposed to exploit, in the utmost secrecy and isolation,

with no white soul near him, so as to obtain that preliminary provincial consent which was essential as a first step before attempting to obtain the Imperial sanction. He had therefore a double dose of this tedious waiting, a penance accompanied by exhausting and nerve-racking days spent in arguing and convincing long-headed Chinamen, much against their will, that what he proposed to do, if properly backed by them, must inevitably make their fortunes. He had played the game up to the last counter with the skill of the born gambler; he had been barely pulling through when his new connection with Kerr had practically insured success. Perhaps it was all this as well as the new fear Carnot had recently communicated to the man.

The astute Swiss seemed always to get an inkling of everything that was going on, and was perpetually rushing in and out with his sun-helmet on the back of his head and his sallow face flushed with an angry tint; and though Lorenzo might pretend to pooh-pooh his views, secretly he paid much attention to them. Carnot was really just as much at home in international or native politics as he was in the art of running a hotel. From his dusty little caravansary, camped immediately beside the Legations of the great countries of the world (and considered by him fully as important), he surveyed the peoples and politics of the Far East with a discriminating and acute cynicism. He dismissed the consideration of a slumbering world-problem with a contemptuous gesture, because he knew that another question was really the question of the hour; and he could turn from explaining just how the action of one country would finally affect the actions of another to a reasoned detailing of the latest Palace intrigue, with an assurance and an *aplomb* which, if nothing else, was rather superb.

It was not wise to argue with Carnot, since his manners did not easily permit that; he contented himself, as he put it, with informing his public either of what was actually going on, or of what might come about. He did not talk to argue, he said. It was he who had obtained absolute infor-

mation, before any one else, of the big national loan which had been carried through so very secretly shortly after Peter Kerr's arrival in Peking. How did he obtain such information? He would not tell. Only sometimes in his expansive moments he hinted at the value of intimacy with every one in this quarter, and even boasted of the unrivalled position he had attained among that whole heterogeneous population which always collects round diplomatic missions in Asiatic lands. Carnot never refused a request for help from any one, no matter how humble his petitioner might be. He chaffed, bullied, beat, and swore at the motley serving-world from one end of the foreign quarter to the other; but nevertheless Carnot was an institution indispensable to the welfare of one and all. It was his magic which secured at a moment's notice cooks, *boys, mafus, amahs,* and all those other necessary adjuncts to the exile's life; and in the case of particular friends and protégés, whenever they were menaced with great trouble he was always ready to go round and swear false excuses, so that at an opportune moment he might be remembered and the debt of gratitude repaid. Every morning there was a blue-coated *queue* of petitioners outside his office doors, waiting on his pleasure. No wonder that he was beloved and received so much information. It might seem like opera bouffe, but it was—Oriental business.

During these days of expectancy, Kerr began to notice that Carnot's appearance was the signal for a flash of almost open anxiety on Lorenzo's part. The Italian waited, indeed, with a tense concentration until Carnot had spoken. As often as not Carnot would merely come up, shrug his lean shoulders, and shake his expressive head. Sometimes he would say, *"Rien, rien du tout. Qu'est ce que vous voulez ces animaux sont lents, mais lents. . . ."*—and then walk away. A stranger hearing him would hardly have guessed that he was referring in this amiable way to those who controlled the destinies of four hundred millions of people. As a matter of fact, what he mainly implied was that his

friend the eunuch had become curiously disappointing. Great surprises had been promised; nothing had come so far; and it was only by blaming the inevitable slowness of the East that it was possible to justify his sensational forecast.

Twice during these waiting days, Lorenzo, to whom exercise, as an exercise, meant absolutely nothing, suggested a walk to Peter Kerr; and following out his curious ideas of pedestrianism, he had each time strolled in the Englishman's company at an exasperatingly slow pace for a couple of hours and more, pausing innumerable times to remark on the rapidly increasing heat of north China. Yet these walks, though dull, were pregnant with meaning.

The first time the Italian had taken Kerr to the top of the Tartar Wall—up one of the broad ramps originally designed so that clouds of defending soldiery could rush at an instant's notice to the defence of the city, without jostling one another or delaying their ill-disciplined movements. These necessary adjuncts to mediæval defensive warfare had now become mere staircases for promenaders who went in search of fresh air and exercise. Peter Kerr, being on the Wall for almost the first time, had suggested that they should walk off to the ancient observatory established by the Jesuits in the time of Louis the Fourteenth, and furnished with wonderful bronze instruments adorned with beautifully chiselled dragons which were the admiration of every globe-trotting scientist.

But Lorenzo was obdurate. He would not go there. What was the use of it anyway? It was a long walk, and another time would do as well. The observatory belonged to an age long since passed. He would take Kerr, he said, to observe the much more interesting present.

So he had walked him at a slow and dignified pace to the great central gate of the Tartar city—the mighty *Ch'ien Men,* above which a tower more splendid than all the other towers of the city proudly rears itself; a tower of wood and brick brilliant with reds and golds and greens and blues and full of archers' windows on which are painted mock

cannon mouths in sombre black so that an ingenuous enemy may be instantly defeated by being instantly dismayed. There was a smaller supporting tower, made entirely of brick and therefore more unbusinesslike in aspect than this gaudy centre one, standing on the outer rim of the great semicircular keep which had been built to lend additional strength to the defences of the main entrance, and over the side entrances were blockhouses—the whole providing a liberal education in Tartar ideas of defensive warfare. The extraordinary strength of these fortifications could not but strike the most unobservant of men.

But it was not to see this, or to dwell on the decay in the picturesque in warfare, that the Italian had brought the Englishman up there; it was for something else. Lorenzo, like most moderns, had little real love for grace or beauty, or for the picturesque. It was power—absolute power—which attracted and entranced him: power to crush men or to crown them with success; power to do as it may please you at any moment of the day or night.

Perhaps this was very natural on his part. In a democratic age, when all men, if they are not equal, at least accept the theory that liberty implies equality, it is really inspiring to think of something which can still afford to disdain such ideas; which pushes on like a Juggernaut's car crushing to death, in spite of all reputed law and order, all who stand in its road—which goes onwards, always onwards, to the allotted end. It is great, it is wonderful, it is lovable. In the West there is now only the multi-millionaire who can afford to be so merciless; in Asia there must always exist, until the end of time, Juggernaut's cars in one form or another, forcing their way through the prostrated crowds.

So Lorenzo, as he came under the shadow of the great Central Tower, full of such ideas, had slackened his pace more and more, until he hardly moved. The view was sufficiently magnificent to account for that. Straight in front of the two men the ruler-like Tartar Wall now heaved away on its giant course, capped at regular intervals by

similar towers which stood proudly out against the dazzling blue of the northern sky as if they were deathless sentinels. A couple of miles distant, the Wall turned sharply to the north, travelling once more for several miles with mathematical accuracy until it had reached the northwest corner, when once again it bent to form the parallel side of the immense enclosed square. To the west and north, where they were looking, the distant hills and mountains rose in towering masses, their pleasant green-grey gradually shading off into ominous dark blue, where these natural defences frowned down on the limitless stretches of grassy Mongolia. Only forty miles away, creeping like a relentless serpent up the highest peaks and spurs and down the most sweeping slopes, ran that mighty work the Great Wall of China—raised by millions of men in ages past to shut off the delectable Chinese cities of the north from the savage, looting hordes dwelling along the outer fringes of the old empire. Though the Great Wall was hidden in the distance it was easy, standing here, to believe in it, to understand why it had been built in such a manner as to form among the chains of mountains a complete barrier two thousand miles long. It was unheard of, monstrous, but it was the most lasting expression of negative power ever conceived—the power which would ward off evil rather than actively defeat it. The Great Wall appeared as a true key-note to the genius of this people.

Lorenzo had seen that Peter Kerr was drinking in this scene as he sauntered to a standstill. So he waited quietly until they were immediately above the great entrance to the Palace. Then, suddenly touching his companion on the shoulder, he wheeled him round.

"Look," he said impressively, "look and understand."

It was indeed a remarkable sight. Immediately below thundered into the great gateway-tunnel like a living torrent all the miscellaneous traffic of this immense capital. There was one endless movement of carts, mules, ponies, donkeys, and camels, now flowing out of the city, and arresting by its

very violence the smaller incoming current. Standing above it all on the high city wall made the clatter seem to rise in tempestuous gusts, as if this throng of men and animals were fighting its way out of the city, frantically anxious to escape some impending fate—hurrying, pushing, shouting, pleading.

Yet beyond the traffic, silent, peaceful, almost contemptuous, was the great open space in front of the Forbidden City, enclosed in heavy white stone railings, and flanked by low-lying guard-houses. In this courtyard there was not a soul. It was empty, completely empty. At the end—perhaps two hundred yards away—rose the pink-coloured wall pierced by the closely-shut gates, above which were great roofs of yellow tiling. The pink-coloured wall did not seem high, because of the vast plan on which the foreground was conceived; nor did the gates seem very imposing or very formidable, since they were borne down by the mighty proportions of the Tartar Wall. Yet the pink wall was singularly massive; and the gates, sheathed in iron and studded with iron knobs, seemed supersolid. They were the so-called Dynastic Gates—the forbidden entrance to the Forbidden City, through which no one may pass save the Emperor travelling in state, or envoys, possessing plenipotentiary powers, on the day they present their credentials.

Beyond this first enclosure the view became confused. The countless green trees within the forbidden precincts formed lakes of green foliage out of which rose line upon line of immense yellow-tiled roofs, marking how courtyard succeeded courtyard at successive entrance. These rich yellow roofs indeed spread away until they at last became lost under a distant cone-shaped hill crowned with pavilions. There were no minarets, or domes, or cupolas, or colonnades, or long façades of fair perspective as in an Indian city of palaces. Here, though the roofs were bathed in a golden light and their wonderful sepia thrown into bold relief by the fierce reds colouring all woodwork, the predominant impression was one of Chinese squareness mixed with barbaric Tar-

tar solidity. It was an Imperial entrenched camp of brick and stone placed in the very centre of a far greater entrenched camp made of the same materials. It was the citadel—the Last Hope of the Dynasty. Its key-note was not fairy-like grace—but power, entrenched power, so strong that under its especial protection the flux of time had brought to its owners an astounding degeneracy.

This squareness, this rectilineal symmetry, followed one everywhere within the Forbidden City just as it did without. It was possible, by going round to an entrance on the eastern or western flank, to see that even within the Forbidden City of Palaces itself—in the very centre—was the very last citadel of all, with a high crenellated grey wall surrounding it, below which ran a stone-faced moat no less than a hundred feet broad. This inner Palace, enclosed in this formidable fashion, was, according to the map-maker, an almost perfect square; and within, protected in this cunning manner, resided in perpetual peace the Imperial Masters. They were therefore hidden away on a military plan devised six or seven centuries before by the Mongol conqueror Kublai Khan, who had only been content to exchange the safety of his movable tented camps for this splendid camp of stone and brick because of its unconquerable strength. The sole phantasy which broke the rectilineal symmetry was the cone-shaped hill. And this hill existed for a most peculiar reason. It was surnamed Coal Hill, and had been built, it was said, of solid coal so as to provide endless fuel for an endless siege. Under the walls of the inner citadel were also long low-lying granaries always kept fully stocked with grain. Artificial lakes within the Imperial City provided ample water to keep the great moats filled, even if the outer supplies and the feeding canals should be cut off. Thus the three siege essentials—water, food, and fuel—were always there; and with these and the heavy walls the emperors were counted safe.

As the two men leaned on the parapet and gazed, Lorenzo explained something of all this to his companion. He talked

in jerky, disconnected sentences, helping his explanations with the little map which he invariably carried in his pocket. Nothing of the wonderful colouring which the setting sun was throwing over the whole Palace, gradually turning the roofs to a glorious dull gold-brown; nothing of the marvellous clearness of the hot day, which made the sky one dazzling dome of audacious blue; nothing of the calm, still ocean of brightest verdure formed of the leaf-hung trees in which the houses of the plebeian city lay as if submerged—nothing of these things attracted the Italian. He never even mentioned them or showed that he was conscious of their existence. He was concerned only with the power centred in the Palace and what that power could do.

"Of course," he concluded, "it has really become fiction that the emperors are so all-powerful that their lightest word can make a desert of their most populous province. They have shut themselves up in their fortress so long that time has defeated them and they have really no strength left. But in the ordinary affairs of life the fiction is sedulously kept up—and it actually works and works well, because it is necessary for the life of the State that it should so work, and all admit it. Thus any little document marked with a stroke of the Vermilion Pencil is a law unto itself. It must be obeyed. The problem is to know what are really the forces which succeed in extracting that stroke of the Vermilion Pencil. If one could only know properly, it might still be possible to do anything—absolutely anything—with the use of a good deal of audacity."

He made an abrupt, fierce movement with his hands and suddenly stopped. Perhaps he did not want to be too clear. Kerr contemplated him with curious eyes. He knew that the Italian's fertile mind had become filled with the boundless possibilities which the present times offered, but he could not understand why he should have suddenly become possessed with this vague craving to accomplish more than it was safe to dream of. What was it? Kerr wondered. It seemed to him, after the many internal

and external complications of the day, it was not only foolish to wish for difficult things, but that such a wish indicated a state of mind by no means healthy. He had a personal interest now in Lorenzo's condition; he liked less and less to see him in this visionary mood. So he disagreed promptly.

"It is all very well," he mused aloud, "to draw these glowing pictures from this coign of vantage, but I don't see what you want. It seems to me there is a hard enough time ahead with what we have on hand without searching for more difficult things. What do you really mean?"

Lorenzo, who was now leaning with his elbows on the brick parapet, his hat pushed back, suddenly straightened up. He shot a quick glance at his companion and then laughed a little bitterly.

"What is the use of telling?" he exclaimed. "If I told you, you would not understand, for you have only been in the country a few weeks, and it needs years to see really obvious things in a strange land. I, it is true, have only been here a year. But I have been much in the East; and of my year six months have been spent in a lonely province with no one else near me. I therefore understand, and understand properly, that, so long as you do not touch the bread of the common people, through the officials and the Emperor you can do anything you like—anything, anything."

He stopped and pointed a significant finger to the heavily-roofed Palaces spread out in front of them, as if that was the key with which to unlock every gate in this land.

"Well?" said Kerr expectantly. He watched his companion with wondering eyes. Here was an imagination which eclipsed his as the mountain eclipses the mole-hill.

"Well," responded the Italian, "the only thing I have to add is that if you made your plan cleverly enough and big enough and solid enough, it would be possible to obtain sole exploitation-rights over the whole empire—that is, over about two million square miles. Do you understand? The sole rights. It would beat anything ever known before,

and the Americans with their little trusts of a few hundred millions would be nowhere."

"But what do you mean?" said Kerr, more than a little puzzled. "What sort of rights?"

"Every kind of rights," answered the Italian. "That is, every kind that would not interfere with the people. Railway and mining rights, water-power rights, canal rights—it would be a giant exploitation company for the benefit of the Chinese government, doing for them what they cannot do for themselves. It would be merely a question of arranging details, once the principles were accepted."

"You forget the Foreign Powers," rejoined his companion with a short laugh. "What would they have to say to your great scheme?"

"Nothing," coolly answered the other. "They would have nothing to say, absolutely nothing—that is, once the stock exchanges were properly interested—the four big exchanges of the world. Have you not seen yourself how the Powers have simply taken advantage of China's inaction—of the palsy hanging over the country? One sees in the home papers how this country or that country is brilliantly succeeding in China, and the people at home probably imagine all sorts of things when they hear of these territorial leases with little bits of railway sticking to them. But what do they really amount to? Nothing. A Foreign Minister goes to this Chinese government with a memorandum in his pocket and harangues the wretched officials ten times, or twenty times, or thirty times, and beats on the table so much that, alarmed at his insistence, they give way, and report to the Throne that acquiescence to his demands has become necessary. But what does a territorial lease really amount to? Nothing. It must wait for time and natural development to make it really worth something, and if there were one great exploitation company with a capital of tens of millions sterling, such as I propose, these concessions given to foreign governments could easily be eaten up or bought back again. It is individuals with great sums of money

behind them that count to-day, and not governments. Governments to-day are not what they used to be, and are generally only brave with their paper memoranda, knowing that the conclusive argument is—war, which they fear. China, if she were superlatively clever, could raise a giant which would swallow back at one meal everything that is being gradually sacrificed."

Peter Kerr shook his head.

"The idea is certainly ingenious," he said, "but it is too big and too wonderful, and no power on earth could materialize it into fact. To make it successful you would require to bring representatives of all the financiers to Peking; and once you did that, our blessed governments would be interfering and claiming a right to decide how the spoils should be divided. It would be much the same thing as is going on, only in a different dress. Give up such dreams, Lorenzo, or else we shall have you turning into a monomaniac."

The Italian shrugged his shoulders in indifference.

"Have it as you will," he said shortly, resuming his old attitude. "I have thought it over so long that I know every aspect. This business could be managed here in Peking without financiers and without foreign governments. It could be done. However, I will say no more."

They tarried a little longer on the imposing Tartar Wall in the immediate neighbourhood of this Forbidden City, which was such a strange magnet for the Italian. It seemed, indeed, to cast the strongest spell over him. When they finally reached their little hotel, Kerr found they had been out only twenty minutes short of three hours. The Italian certainly knew how to kill time, with all his theories and musings and dreamings.

That was the first excursion on which Lorenzo had taken Peter Kerr. Later in the same week he told him he would like him to go again for a walk, when he would show him an equally interesting sight. Would he start at seven the next morning? Kerr, having nothing really to do, assented

readily enough, though he wondered what it would be this time. However much he might disagree with Lorenzo, he realized that intercourse with this subtle and far-seeing man was rapidly educating him to a complete understanding of conditions which, had he been left to himself, he would have had the greatest difficulty in grasping alone. The weeks he had already spent in Peking had to a great extent thrown him out of his old bearings, and made him even wonder frequently what relation his present self bore to his former self. He therefore leaned a great deal on Lorenzo. Kerr had been accustomed to associate all human activity with rushing about and occupying one's self all day long with endless minutiæ. It was not strange, then, that these unending days of waiting tended to make him think that he was culpably inactive. Generally speaking it takes an Oriental to understand that inaction is the mother of all action. Possibly the growing mediocrity of the West in all matters but the perfection of purely mechanical contrivances may really be largely due to what may be called the present patriarchy of action—assuming that there is such a thing as a matriarchy of inaction. It was the great American philosopher who said that we most foolishly call the poet inactive merely because he is not a president or a merchant or a porter; it was he who also added so eloquently that all institutions are founded on thoughts and that consequently real action is in the silent moments—in the moments when one sits brooding. It need not be inferred therefrom that a blissful life of *dolce far niente* is the only one fit to be cultivated, but rather that certain stereotyped methods of activity are not necessarily as valuable as they may seem, and that mental and bodily repose is very excellent for all. However little Peter Kerr had hitherto troubled his head about such points of view, they were now forced on his attention. And as he was by no means a stupid man, he wondered how it had happened that his knowledge of the world had remained so small. He began to regret acutely his earlier self-sufficiency.

Lorenzo, on the other hand, had an ample and astonishing

philosophy, accustomed to all possible points of view and willing patiently to consider and, if necessary, to put into practice at once the most novel ideas. He could spend entire days thinking over a single point—thinking, thinking, thinking, until he had completely grasped its every meaning. It was for this reason that he was so successful as a schemer. If each time after his long sojourns in the most dissimilar parts of the world—in pursuit of his various schemes—he had finally returned home and dissipated much of his good fortune in something closely resembling riotous living, this was because his mind, having for the time being ceased working, could suggest to him nothing better to do than to pander to his body. And so he would fling himself among the revellers of Paris and Rome and London and forget temporarily that he had ever really worked.

Even when he was really superlatively active, as he was at present, few realized it. He seemed to be loafing—to be taking things very easily. Lorenzo was quite content to be busy in his own peculiar way until four or five o'clock in the afternoon (he might be stretched in a long-chair most of the time), when he would possibly take his tennis-racket and stroll to the modest little Club, there to spend the slow hours until dinner-time. Whether he actually played tennis or not seemed to be a matter of profound indifference to him; his true exercise was in his head. It was not merely because he was inclined to be fat that he was apparently inactive; it was because other things interested him more. It is not all people who find happiness in perspiration: some prefer pantology; others revel in pantophagy; not to speak of those who never find happiness at all.

In pursuance of his plan, punctually at seven o'clock in the morning Lorenzo knocked at Kerr's door. The Italian was dressed in his customary manner, in spite of the early hour—that is, with excessive care and colour. Lorenzo's sartorial efforts were of the kind which only receive full recognition on the Riviera, or in the Cascine of Florence, or in other places of that sort where blue skies and happy cos-

mopolitans abound. Here they seemed to be almost aggressively out of place.

"Good-morning," said he briefly; "are you ready? If so, let us start and not talk—at least, not at first. It is too early to talk. Besides, nobody has any real ideas until far later in the day." Lorenzo would have possibly liked to add that he did not wish to listen to anybody in Peking; but as that would have meant more talk, he duly refrained from saying any such thing.

So Kerr lighted a cigarette, and said not a word; and together the two men went out of the hotel in strict silence.

The air at that hour was still fresh and agreeable, for the lusty sun, which would presently blaze down wrathfully, was as yet a few feet above the eastern city walls and was content to be just mildly provocative. Kerr soon found that Lorenzo's gait, whatever its other shortcomings, was peculiarly suited to an Eastern climate; and though both men soon became hot, Lorenzo took care that they did not become very hot.

Kerr's knowledge of the topography of the city was now sufficient to inform him that they were steadily moving due north by the straightest way possible; but it was not until they had reached a vastly broad cross-road, and that the sun's rays smote them on their backs, that he understood the Italian's manœuvres. They were now going in the same direction as a great many people dressed in official clothes, all riding ponies or mules or driving rapidly in carts; and not far from them loomed up a heavy gateway of the pink Forbidden City.

"But——" began Peter Kerr, coming to a halt, as he understood where Lorenzo was leading him.

The Italian stopped him with a gesture.

"But nothing," he said. "Wait; wait and see."

So, pushing their way through the growing throng at a quicker pace, they soon came to the gateway, and without a word Lorenzo promptly led the way through. There were a number of picturesque if villainous-looking guards lounging

there; but to Kerr's surprise they paid little or no attention to them. Their parti-coloured tunics; their turbans; their flapping trouser-covers, called tiger-legs; their heavy, brass-bound jingals; their curved swords encased in green scabbards—all these things recalled the fact that Peking had been even to the Persians the City of Wonders, and that the mystery of the Tartar capital had furnished those cunning story-tellers with materials for some of their most fantastic tales.

Immediately inside this first gate were the guard-houses. Romantic-looking spears, with long tassels of red horsehair hanging round their rusty heads, stood ranged in wooden racks in front of the guard-houses; while hanging from the walls were heavy Manchu bows and leather quivers full of the long slim arrows with which the conquest of China had once been so easily effected. There were also lines of sorry-looking steeds hitched to long ropes that were carried along the walls by means of heavy iron rings embedded in the masonry. These poor animals might themselves have been centuries old, so forlorn and broken did they appear. Assembled in the manner they had been assembled for two centuries and more at the gates of the Palace, these military preparations formed a vivid illustration of the decadence of the empire. They told the sad story of China during the nineteenth century more eloquently than a hundred books.

The crowd flowing through these Imperial gates, and proceeding along the raised roadway in a much narrowed stream, was not bothered, however, with any such thoughts. Rudely pushing and elbowing their way, they impressed Kerr with the idea that they were like the grains of sand on a seashore, which are beyond all counting and are yet impelled here and there by the beating of the waves.

Perhaps it was because the two men were now within the gates of the Imperial City, and therefore intruders in a double sense in this yellow world, that the passers-by now

allowed a curious enmity to show itself towards them. Their progress was continually blocked—they were made the objects of much covert insolence and rude laughter. Finally a file of big, bronzed fellows coming from the opposite direction suddenly bore straight down on them; and as deliberately as possible, to the immense amusement of every one who saw it, the leading man bumped himself into Peter Kerr so hard that only with an effort did he save himself from falling.

For Kerr, whose mood had been secretly hovering on the edge of extreme bad temper for many days, this incident was sufficient to make him explode as a blow of the hammer explodes a case of explosives. Before any one had realized what was coming, he recovered himself; and throwing his arm round the man's neck, with a single sharp movement he sent him flying ignominiously head over heels down the steep embankment of the roadway. There the man lay rolling in the dust. The answer to the challenge given had come with lightning rapidity.

Lorenzo, who was a few steps in front, had seen nothing of this. The curious quick murmur of a mob, however, was so well known to him that, the very second he heard it, he whirled round, and in a flash grasped what had happened.

"Go on, go on," he urged, quickly thrusting Kerr forward, and at the same time pushing his hands into his pockets. Kerr reluctantly took a step or two, and then stood still. The Italian drew a silver dollar from his pocket with one hand; the other hand he kept under his coat, but scarcely far enough to conceal a revolver. The fallen man, livid with rage though half subdued, was already climbing up the embankment. Lorenzo approached him and tendered him the dollar.

"*Yao pu yao?*" he said in his few words of useful Chinese. "Will you have it or not?"

The man, sullen yet dominated, stood there undecided.

"*Yao pu yao?*" repeated Lorenzo, this time with an ominous ring in his voice. Also he brought his revolver clean out, so that every one could see it.

"Take it, take it," urged the man's companions in a chorus, now fearful of what might not happen. So sullenly the man extended his hand, and no sooner had his finger closed on the coin than Lorenzo pointed down the road.

"*Tso*—go," he said briefly, "go."

Lorenzo did not stir an inch or change his attitude for a full half-minute, though a thick crowd buzzed round him. At last convinced that the man, surrounded by his companions, had really gone on and would not return, he rejoined Kerr.

"Well," he said, as Kerr, who had somewhat cooled, explained to him how it had happened, "well, I can only ask you to be more careful. You must remember that if a wave of anger comes, it may be a little like being caught in a tiger's cage. It is of course your own fault—but that is by the way. Remember only that if the wave of anger comes we will be like men in a tiger's cage."

That is all Lorenzo said as he walked on and brandished a brilliantly-coloured handkerchief.

Right in front of them there now loomed up another massive gateway with a crenellated grey wall extending away on both sides of it. There was a glimpse of a broad moat below the wall, and there were guards looking over the wall, but it was the scene around the massive gateway which attracted attention rather than these things. Separating the neighbourhood of the gateway from the various broad approaches were very high wooden palings, painted red and furnished with small wicket-gates. Inside these palings, but outside the gateway, was an immense phalanx of carts, with hundreds of mules and ponies picketed beside them. Dense groups of official servants comprising all the miscellaneous attendants of Chinese officialdom stood or sat about, with their red-tasselled official hats carelessly bestowed on their heads or even carried in their hands. All this serving-

world awaited the return of the mass of officials who had gone into the Palace that dawn. Sellers of sweetmeats and stews and fruits hawked things unconcernedly through the red wooden palings to these people, which were devoured in hasty mouthfuls. The ground was littered with the remains of such impromptu meals; and the many street-dogs, attracted by the pleasant odour which greeted their nostrils, now cunningly slipped in here and there, and snarling and fighting among themselves, greedily gulped down every morsel they could find. It was a rather remarkable early morning scene.

Lorenzo pushed his way through the loafing crowd until he got right up to the wooden palings. An officious guard put out a sheathed sword to warn him away, but the Italian calmly slipped into his hand another one of those silver dollars which he was so constantly finding useful. The soldier thereupon motioned him to stand so that no one should see him. Then he discreetly turned his back. Lorenzo touched Kerr on the arm.

"I wish you to observe this whole scene and attempt to understand it. If you can, it will be better for you in your business than years of residence in the country. You see in front of you the whole manner in which the government of China—that is, the government of four hundred millions—is carried on. All the business of the empire may be said to flow every morning through these gates and then out again. It has been estimated that sometimes ten thousand people go in and come out of the Palace in a single day, and those thousands are the links which connect the Throne to the four hundred millions."

He stopped a moment, and pulled out his watch.

"It is now half-past seven," he continued, "and you will soon begin to see a movement. All the big business has long been over. It began at daylight. Soon there will be a surprising procession of sedan-chairs and carts and riders. You will not see perhaps ten thousand people, unless you stay here all day, but you will see a vast herd—a great

herd," he concluded, thoughtfully grasping the red wooden palings in his hands and staring through.

The street-hawkers and the curious, having finally made up their minds that these two white men would just at present do none of those surprising things which made them so constantly objects of open-mouthed interest, began to break the close ring which they had formed. There were constant mutters to be heard, which might have been expressions of disappointment. "What were these two foolish ones looking at so long?" those mutters seemed to say.

Peter Kerr, though still irate from his encounter, gradually realized, as he took in the scene in front of him, that there was really an element of special interest here such as could be found in no other land. The great crowd of waiting men and animals, thickly covering a few acres of ground, as if acres were nothing at all in such a vast empire, could undoubtedly not fail to impart a sense of bigness, of importance, of the complex interests of countless millions. Also they showed clearly to him the gulf which had to be bridged before any such ventures as the one he was seeking to make successful could really become an accomplished fact. The masses of ponies and mules, with their curious mediæval-looking saddles and clumsy iron stirrups; the Peking carts, so square, so stiff-looking, so unique; the big, bronzed-faced men, with their rather absurd hats, their womanish yet picturesque long coats, and their high square-toed riding-boots of cloth; all these men waiting for two hours, or four hours, or six hours, or any length of time; the manner in which everything was littered together with no semblance of order; the vivid colouring which would have been audacious and theatrical out of Asia—every one of these things clearly informed him, each in a different way, of the great gulf. These things had at least been evolved from the nation's inner consciousness; they were part and parcel of a scheme of society probably essential to withstand the demoralizing effect of climate; and now Europeans proposed to upset it all with alien things such as railways! It was well to look at the

question from a purely native point of view when one stood under the shadow of the embattled inner Palace wall which sheltered the Son of Heaven and his imperious Mother.

A vague stirring and commotion in the throng before them showed that something was about to happen. In an indolent way, the guards assumed a more military formation and waved the hawkers aside; and presently one of the great brass-knobbed red gates, which had hitherto only stood ajar, was slowly swung back. Several men came out hastily at a jog-trot; and at their summons numbers of retainers got up, adjusted their dress and hats, and seized their ponies. Other men jumped on to long carts, and the drivers, with a sharp whip-cracking and calling, steered their teams out of the press. Then more warning shouts came from the gates, and out suddenly swept a line of green-covered sedan-chairs, each swiftly borne by four bearers and accompanied by other men walking beside at the highest possible speed in order to keep up.

There were five or six of these chairs, and without a single halt their bearers strode as fast as they could through the narrow lane left clear and then out of the wicket-gates. The outriders were on their ponies and had surrounded the chairs in the twinkling of an eye, and no sooner had the chairs passed away than the lumbering long carts, each with its quota of relay chair-coolies squatting closely together, followed quickly after them. In an ever-increasing cloud of dust the long cortège disappeared down the road Kerr and Lorenzo had come. It was over in a shorter time than it takes to tell.

Lorenzo smiled with satisfaction.

"Did you perhaps notice," he asked, "how many men there were in all? I roughly jotted it down for your benefit. Including every one, about one hundred and twenty-two men have gone off with those people. But wait, here comes some smaller fry attached to these bigwigs."

A fresh number of men came through the red gates, some carrying little bundles done up in cloth, some having big

portfolios under their arms. After some fresh shouting more carts and ponies were detached from the mass, and very quickly half a hundred more people passed away.

Lorenzo kept Kerr until the great square in front of them was half emptied. He was quite right. In thirty or forty minutes a thousand people must have left, and the total during the whole day could not be much less than the reputed ten thousand.

CHAPTER XV

"Mais c'est donc une revolte!
Non, Sire, c'est une révolution."
Vie du Duc de la Rochefoucauld Liancourt.

It was exactly on the eighteenth day after the interview with the Manchu Prince that the dull spell was broken. Peter Kerr, resigned to a belief in the inevitable monotony of things, was becoming more and more gloomy owing to his enforced inaction. He disbelieved in his scheme; he disbelieved thoroughly in his own intelligence; and he was also pleased to disbelieve in humanity generally.

Madame Boisragon, with whom he had hoped to cultivate a pleasant acquaintance, had somehow disappeared from his horizon. She remained hidden in her rooms, or if she went out at all he never saw her. He had boldly hoped that she would give him an opportunity to become friendly with her, in spite of the hateful little husband who mysteriously appeared and disappeared and always frowned suspiciously on every one with consistent impartiality, as if the world were in arms against him. But though Kerr had ridden assiduously almost every morning in the hope of meeting her abroad, for some reason she had not gone out excepting on one occasion—which was the very day of his early morning walk with Lorenzo. This added fuel to the flames of his discontent; for he had let slip an opportunity which perhaps might not come to him readily again. It seemed that Fate was bent on provoking him. He felt almost vindictively towards Lorenzo, in spite of the fact that the Italian had been actuated by the best of motives in taking him abroad—that is, by the desire to educate him up to a general understanding of the complicated problem confronting him. There are times, however, when there can be too much educating

and too little play. The mental stimulus of dry facts is doubtless excellent, but it is also somewhat fatiguing. Peter Kerr was becoming frankly tired of acquiring a knowledge which was too full of the abstract, and too utterly devoid of the concrete. They say that knowledge is power; but then, unfortunately, against this must be set the fact that ignorance is bliss; and that most men prefer bliss to power.

Had Peter Kerr been destined to live in the East for a lengthy period running into years, he would have possibly soon resigned himself to the inevitable and attempted to take things just as they came. But he had the uncomfortable feeling all the while that he was standing still whilst great events were in the making. He was learning much—but what was the real use of it all? He felt more and more often that one day he would be reproaching himself for not having shown more foresight and more energy at a great turning-point in his life. That is how he put it to himself.

Yet how was he to act? He confessed that he could not have done better than to place himself in Lorenzo's hands; for the Italian, whatever his faults, was certainly doing everything that was possible. If he had adopted the usual tactics, and made himself a petitioner at the gates of his Legation, he would have been in a worse position, he felt convinced. The whole problem was very tantalizing.

So Peter Kerr, irritably biting the cigar he was smoking, because he was full of such irritating thoughts, at length came down into the lower hall of the hotel, wondering what to do; and just as he had walked to the front door, in rushed Carnot with his sun-helmet on the back of his head and his cadaverous face flushed with the heat.

"Good-morning," said the hotel-keeper, nodding unceremoniously to the Englishman in his usual offhand manner. "Have you seen Lorenzo—Mister Lorenzo?" he added, correcting himself.

"No," answered Kerr briefly. Yet, made curious by the other's manner, he continued: "What is it?"

"Let us first find him," parried the other, wiping his forehead. *"Boy!"* he shouted. *"Boy!"*

Several dim forms started up from various dark hiding-places and came silently forward.

"Ah, animaux!" Carnot adjured them in French, "always tired, always sleepy! Find Monsieur Lorenzo—quick, do you understand? Run, jump!"

Roused by his hurrying tones, they began disappearing in various directions, anxious to placate their master. But their help was not needed. Lorenzo, looking as if he had come out of a French bandbox, with the pinkest of pink shirts showing above his crimson cummerbund, and the most striking tie in his wardrobe adorning his neck, suddenly appeared.

"Well," he said coolly, "you are making a great noise. I was watching behind that door to see how much you could make. What is the trouble?"

"Ah," said Carnot with a look of relief, dropping his arms, "there you are. I will tell you over there—come along."

He led the way to his office, and as soon as they were inside he closed the door.

"This is what I have for you," he said very seriously.

He threw some rough printed sheets of Chinese hieroglyphics on his desk.

"Thanks," remarked Lorenzo ironically, affecting to be totally unimpressed. "Perhaps when you have cooled a little you will be good enough to explain what may happen to be in those papers. You may remember then that, not being a Chinaman, I cannot read Chinese."

He paused and surveyed the Swiss with his usual cynical smile. Lorenzo was always pleased when he scored in this way.

"Hein!" exclaimed Carnot with a peculiar nasal twang, picking up his papers again and waving them in the air. "You do not know an Imperial Edict when you see it? You do not——"

"Explain yourself," interrupted Lorenzo roughly. It seemed to Kerr that he had paled ever so slightly, though his peculiar expression had not changed.

"With pleasure," replied Carnot with an important air, "but prepare to be surprised. The Emperor, the young Emperor, has completely taken things into his own hands, and is abolishing all the old customs and all the old women who have been running the country. Everything old is to be abolished as quickly as possible. The Edicts are turning everything upside down. I have just seen my friend the eunuch, and he says never before has there been such a stir. They are coming and going in and out of the Palace by the thousand. There will be trouble—of course there will be trouble."

"But the details—the details," interrupted Lorenzo irritably. "Spare us your explanations and give us some facts."

For a moment Carnot looked as if he would let fly a rude reply: then he checked himself.

"Well," he said gruffly. "*Primo,* the old woman" (thus it was he designated the illustrious Empress Dowager) "is told to mind her own business and retire. *Secondo,* a number of useless Yamêns and some few thousand useless officials are abolished. *Terzo,* new laws are promised on all subjects, and so on."

"Nothing else?" Lorenzo was smiling amiably now.

"Nothing else," answered Carnot, "but there is time for that yet. Wait for to-morrow and the next and the day after. It is going to be gay yet, I promise you."

He laughed boisterously.

Lorenzo did not answer. He merely resolutely buttoned up his coat, hiding thereby his great expanse of pink shirt. It was as if he were preparing for a fray in which vanity had no place. Then he took up the papers Carnot had brought him and rang for the interpreters. On hearing that they were in the hotel, he briefly excused himself. The hotel-keeper's bombshell had certainly taken effect, no matter how much Lorenzo might try to laugh it off.

Carnot, for a few minutes, explained to Kerr some of the probable effects of these curious documents, and then went away hurriedly again. In moments like this he was always busy—no one exactly knew why.

Kerr mused by himself. The perturbation of the other two men relieved his mood and made him more happy. Here, to understand politics one had to go back to the times of the seventeenth century in Europe—in France, for instance—when the influence of the ruler's mood on high politics was noticeable at every turn. The magic words *le roi s'ennuie,* when the "sun-king" reigned, were sufficient to cause more alarm at Versailles than a Spanish defeat; and therefore it should really be no surprise that here, where the divine right of the emperors rested on the irrefragable evidence of thirty centuries, the fiat of the Son of Heaven should make all men tremble. The possibilities were certainly endless.

Yet there was this to be considered: first, the prison-like nature of the immensely strong palace of the Manchus—this Kremlin of Kremlins; and then, the strange manner in which those great streams of officials, flowing in and out at an hour when the civilized world had not yet taken its breakfast, kept up sole communication between the four hundred millions and the rulers. Kerr was now sincerely glad that he had gone on his walks with Lorenzo, for he realized that these two facts made any reversing of old-established things very dangerous work—and the prospect interested him. It was all very well for the Manchu rulers during the first years of the Manchu conquest of China to do as they liked. Now, however, the passage of time and the enervating influence of the palaces had effected the inevitable change, and the conquerors of yesterday were the slaves of to-day. They were enslaved by the Chinese system—enslaved by the divine right which was part of that system, and which was based not really on political but on religious doctrines. Though the young Emperor, anxious to release himself finally from the leading-strings of the old Empress Dowager, might try to revive the traditions of his illustrious ancestors, the old

armies had ceased to exist and now there was only paper and the Vermilion Pencil. It might be, as Carnot had expressed it, very gay.

Kerr spent an hour or so in idly discussing the matter with various people in the hotel, and then went upstairs. The servants had now lowered the bamboo blinds on the verandahs to shield the hotel from the fierce heat of the sun. It was much more pleasant here, he found, than in the noisy hall, and with a sigh of relief he sank into a cane long-chair.

A dozen yards or so away, a simple Japanese screen divided his portion of the verandah from the rest; and as he threw a casual glance in that direction, to his surprise he suddenly saw through a narrow gap Madame Boisragon. She had her hat on and was looking out on to the street. She was also fanning herself vigorously with a large palm-leaf fan, as if she had just come back from some excursion.

Something prompted Kerr not to hesitate. At once he sprang to his feet and walked forward.

"Is it permitted to say good-morning over the barrier?" he inquired, coming boldly up to the screen and looking through.

"The barrier appears no very solid defence, whether I wish it or not," commented Madame Boisragon as he doubled back a leaf of the screen.

"Oh!" he exclaimed with disappointment in his voice, but with his hands still on the barrier.

"No, no," she laughed, "it does not matter. I am quite alone: you can really come in."

She pushed a chair towards him, and at the same time seated herself. On a rattan table were some letters which she had just opened. He was conscious that there was a subtle change in her, which he could not account for.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked as he took a seat and watched her fan herself.

"The news?" she said quickly. "What news—what do you mean?"

The colour stole slowly into her cheeks, and she studied him anxiously with her grave brown eyes.

"It is about the Emperor," said Kerr. "There is apparently a great fuss going on in the Palace. The Emperor has begun decreeing the abolition of government offices and countless officials and all sorts of other things. People who understand these matters seem generally much upset and look upon it as the beginning of many developments."

"What a nuisance," she answered, yet speaking in curiously relieved tones. "There seems always something sensational taking place here; and the result is that we poor people have to wait on for endless months twisting our fingers in despair."

"You talk as if you were a syndicate-monger yourself," laughed Peter Kerr.

"I am nearly related to the tribe," she answered slowly.

She glanced at him quickly and then looked away.

"That is true," assented Peter Kerr, a little vaguely. Just then he remembered what Lorenzo had said about the man Boisragon, and he was curiously irritated.

For some time he watched Madame Boisragon thoughtfully picking faded flowers out of a little Peking *cloisonné* jar which stood on the rattan table, whilst he wondered what she was really thinking about.

"It is very hot, is it not?" she said, breaking the silence at last. "I have just come back from seeing my husband off on a long expedition. The streets are baking."

"That is true," he assented readily. Inwardly he was suddenly excited; outwardly he appeared calm. He continued: "The mornings are almost worse than the afternoons, and I for one try never to go out between ten o'clock and four o'clock."

Madame Boisragon made no reply; she was certainly very busy thinking.

"Shall we have a lemon-squash, or anything of that sort?" he suggested after a pause, feeling that something was pre-

venting the conversation from progressing; and receiving her assent he went off for a minute.

"Do you ever feel lonely here?" he inquired when he had returned. He had made up his mind that he would force her to talk. "I have often wondered. This hotel certainly gets on my nerves—it irritates me—it makes me dissatisfied; and therefore if it produces that effect on a mere man, what must it not do in the case of a woman."

"One has to be philosophical in this world," she replied. "In the end the days somehow come and go monotonously, and one can always console one's self with the thought that it is not going on forever."

"That is all very well," argued Peter Kerr, wondering if he was going to fail again, "but still that is really the very worst of all doctrines—it is the doctrine of despair."

"Is not one doctrine as good as another?" she inquired, beginning to sip her cold drink through a straw.

He dissented with a vigorous shake of his head.

"No," he said very decidedly, "certainly not. Some people are always fortifying themselves with that point of view —that everything will pass, including the disagreeable things. But that does not really compensate one in the least for having to endure the disagreeable things. The present should always be the great time—there should be no time like the time actually rolling away under one's feet. Consequently your French proverb is wicked. *Tout passe, tout casse, tout lasse,* may be true, but the man or woman who says or acts it ought really to be beaten."

"You are very eloquent," she answered suddenly, looking amused, and fanning herself once more. Perhaps the French quotation had appealed to her. He gained confidence.

"I feel eloquent," he replied, smiling at her. "It is the first time I have enjoyed a talk with you for ages."

Her fan stopped for an instant, as she watched him from under the broad brim of her hat.

"Have you been riding much lately?" she inquired with

unexpected abruptness, as if he had made her remember something she had almost forgotten.

"Every blessed morning, save on one cruel occasion."

"Dear me," she answered, looking interested, "and that occasion——"

"Was the only morning you went out."

Madame Boisragon laughed.

"How disappointing that must have been!"

"It was far worse: it was maddening."

She was still employing the trick of looking up quickly as he spoke and then looking away. But this time he was ready for her and their eyes met.

"Won't you take pity on me?" he said suddenly in a new way.

Involuntarily she coloured and her manner became less calm.

"What a curious way to put it," she answered with pretended indifference. "You do not look in the least like a man to be pitied. Why do you say that?"

He laughed, a little uncertain what his answer should be.

"Perhaps to give you confidence," he announced finally. "I am afraid of frightening you. You disappear so easily in spite of your flimsy barrier—and think how cruel that is on me."

"How absurd you always are," she objected, nevertheless smiling again.

After that they discussed things without treading on dangerous ground; until the tiffin-gong, sounding uproariously through the little hotel, warned them that the morning had magically fled.

CHAPTER XVI

"Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée."
DE BRUEYS ET DE PALAPRAT, *Le Grondeur.*

ENTHUSIASM is necessary at every crucial stage of the human game. Your unenthusiastic man is of small account in all walks of life, or at least should be, since he will be inclined to take too much for granted and will assume that there is too little to be gained by uncompromising energy. Enthusiasm is indeed almost akin to heroism; for heroism, as a great philosopher has put it, is the military attitude of the soul enabling one to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies. A man with no enthusiasm could not possibly do that.

It had not escaped Lorenzo's notice that Kerr had begun to act lately in a much bored and tired way, as if he were becoming sated with this worrying and plotting and planning—as if he would gladly give it all up.

It therefore speedily aroused his curiosity when that same evening Kerr came down to dinner a considerably changed man. Kerr seemed interested in all the Italian told him regarding the import of the sensational Imperial Decrees of the morning; he made a number of good suggestions as to what steps they should try and take together to safeguard their interests, and altogether his energy seemed revived and stimulated.

After he had said good-night Lorenzo sat a long while alone thinking the matter over. For the life of him he could not imagine what the solution was; and to help himself solve the problem he finally lit a very long, thin, black Italian cigar that goes by the name of Virginia. Lorenzo believed greatly in examining a problem carefully in all its bear-

ings, since one always comes across something of value after a spell of patient thought.

The biting fumes of the strong cigar between his teeth must have been oddly stimulating to him; for almost immediately after he had ceased paying attention to his weed and sat entirely engrossed in his thoughts, he gave vent to a great oath. He then began laughing so loudly to himself that the dining-room *boys,* dozing behind screens, started up alarmed, thinking him perhaps gone mad. One never quite knew with these outlanders, their manner seemed to say; foreigners were subject to all sorts of fits. What was the matter with this one?

As he sat there with his head thrown back and his black beard sticking straight out, Lorenzo indeed looked like a veritable Mephistopheles—a Mephistopheles, it is true, who has become somewhat fat through good living, but who still remains a Mephistopheles.

"What a fool!" he murmured to himself softly in Italian, as soon as he had recovered somewhat. "What a fool!" he repeated, yet speaking with curious satisfaction. "What a fool!"

Then a new thought struck him. At once he stopped laughing and his features stiffened.

He must have made up his mind very quickly, for, with a new look, he instructed a servant to go and find his master at once. The blue-coated *boy* whisked noiselessly away, the grey cigar-smoke whirling out of the hot dining-room behind him in a vortex.

Carnot was not long in coming. When he was not out of the hotel he was always working, and when he worked he was not hard to find. His rough, bragging voice was generally well raised in some distant part of the hotel, cursing or joking with his servants. Carnot was a strange enough mortal, with a great gift for doing exactly as he felt like doing.

Now he strolled carelessly into the dining-room, pulling

on a white duck jacket as he walked and smoothing out his hair.

"Eh bien, qu'est-ce qu'il à?" he began in his Swiss French with all his odd familiarity.

"Sit down," answered Lorenzo in the same language, with his rolling Italian accent. Then, before saying anything further, he offered him a glass of cognac.

Carnot drained the little glass after the manner of the expert—that is, at one draught—setting it down with a thump which was accompanied by a sigh of satisfaction.

"Eh bien," he repeated more lazily, leaning his elbows on the table and looking at Lorenzo inquiringly. They had the dining-room entirely to themselves, for the servants had cunningly slipped away, fearing that if anything was said which might anger their master he would first vent his wrath on them. That was a very old trick, which he often employed.

"About this man Boisragon, what do you really know of him?" began Lorenzo abruptly, looking keenly across the table with his bright eyes.

"Oh," said Carnot indifferently, "I only know what you know, which is practically the same as saying nothing. He comes, he goes, he eats, he sleeps—and, I am pleased to say, his bills are paid most regularly."

Lorenzo interrupted him with an irritable gesture.

"Save yourself the trouble of telling me those things," he said coldly. "I am not asking you questions to amuse myself. I wish to learn something interesting and valuable. For instance, for how long has he gone away just now, where has he gone to, what is his object in going?"

"You do not want to know much," replied the cadaverous innkeeper ironically. He made as if he had no intention of being obliging—yet he accepted with alacrity the second little glass which Lorenzo poured out for him. He tossed the contents down his throat like a trooper and then slowly crossed his arms on the table. For a while he was apparently much occupied in thinking.

"Well, since I have found out all these things," he said finally, "there is no real reason why I should not tell you—if it is of importance. He will be away about a month—at least a month, I should say. He has gone to the Yang-tse overland, and his object is to secure the preliminary contract for some railways down there. And what is more, I believe this time he will succeed. There you have it."

If Carnot had expected that the Italian would show surprise he was disappointed. Lorenzo only smiled a little mysteriously, and began sharpening a pencil with an elaborate penknife which he had taken from his pocket.

"Why will he succeed?" he asked when he had finished his pencil.

"Why?" echoed Carnot. "For the best of reasons, *parbleu!* Because he is now properly supported by two governments, and possibly by three."

"Ah!" said Lorenzo sharply.

This time he was aroused and did not conceal it.

"Who told you that—how did you find it out?" he continued.

"The way I find everything out—by listening and picking up threads."

"Still," persisted the Italian, "you could not state what you have stated without good authority. What is your authority?"

Carnot looked almost suspiciously across the table, and at the same time he frowned.

"Come, come," he began once more in his rough grumbling voice. "I don't mind telling what I know, but to play the *juge d'instruction* is a bit stiff. Besides——" He paused and looked openly aggrieved.

Lorenzo laughed softly as a woman might have done. There was nothing jarring at all in his laugh. It was as if a child had to be humoured and soothed; and to give point to it, he reached over the table with his long bottle of brandy and filled Carnot's glass for the third time, so full that the spirit lapped over the brim.

"My dear fellow," he said very quietly, "never begin to feel angry until you have just cause. I will now be quite frank with you. I wish to know these things because they intimately affect the Englishman Kerr and myself; and also because they may affect the length of our stay in your delightful hotel. Tell me now how you found out about this government support."

This time Carnot did not drink off the little glass at one draught. He amused himself sipping it slowly, and with a few last drops still in the bottom of the glass, he sat there with his head thrown back and his eyes on the ceiling. His sallow face had become somewhat flushed, and his eyes glittered in a curious way.

"Well, I will tell you," he said at last. "It comes from the chancellery of my Legation."

"Ah!" said Lorenzo, immediately relapsing into silence. His subtle mind recognized the ring of truth in that statement. He knew, of course, that Carnot would just as soon have lied to him as not. But Lorenzo also knew what very few men know—that truths really worth knowing are had almost as often from persons who habitually prevaricate as from so-called truthful people. One of the greatest talents is to be able to distinguish the grain from the chaff.

He reflected for a long time on what he had heard and seemed quite satisfied.

"Thank you, *mon ami,*" he said sincerely at last. "What you have told me is of great service."

Carnot got up.

"I suppose," remarked Lorenzo carelessly, "that Madame Boisragon will remain here all the time that her husband is absent?"

"I suppose so," said Carnot, pausing with his hands on the back of his chair.

"Has there ever been——" Lorenzo stopped suddenly and looked at Carnot with a queer smile.

Carnot understood him at once.

"Ah, no," he said emphatically, "never."

Lorenzo got up and put the pencil which he had so busily sharpened carefully away in his pocket. Then he held out his hand.

"Good-night," he said, "and thank you again."

Without another word he walked off to his room with his quick, short steps. He had got the solution, he was sure. . . .

Upstairs Peter Kerr was whistling softly to himself. It was plain that his good spirits had in no wise abated. Had he guessed how Lorenzo had been spending the latter part of the evening, he might have been less happy. Fortunately one is spared from knowing all that might be good for one to know; and Kerr, blissful in his ignorance that a subtle mind was preparing to watch him very closely, continued to whistle and hum to himself.

Once Peter Kerr's mind turned indeed for an instant to Lorenzo, and he wondered what new measures he would take in the face of the new developments which had come. Lorenzo would rise to the occasion, he had no doubt.

And just then Peter Kerr blew out his light.

A hotel is curiously like a box, full of different compartments, each containing different kinds of insects, engaged in their own special antics. Separated only by lath and plaster, some are doing one thing, some another thing, and some nothing at all. Imagine how amusing it would be if one could get a simultaneous view of these manifold activities!

Not more than forty or fifty feet from Kerr Madame Boisragon was reclining and turning over the leaves of a French novel under the pretence of reading. As a matter of fact she was much more busy thinking than reading, and once or twice so intent were her thoughts that the paper-covered novel almost fell from her hand.

Now the cruel dictum of one Publius Syrus that a woman who thinks alone thinks of mischief, is certainly as untrue as

every other sweeping statement. But still, look what La Fontaine said in the fable of the woman turned into a cat! Nature, sang the French story-teller, is such that

> Jamais vous n'en serez les maîtres,
> Qu'on lui ferme la porte au nez,
> Il reviendra par la fenêtre.

It so happened that through her open windows Madame Boisragon could see the stars glittering in a sky of sombre blue. There was infinite poetry in the street-cries which floated on the still, dry air.

Their strange cadences, their sudden pauses and breaks, seemed full of mystery, of vague hopes and fears.

During the day she had had three separate conversations with Peter Kerr, each one longer than the last.

Perhaps that was why now she felt so very much alone. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

"Raisonner sur l'amour, c'est perdre la raison."
BOUFFLERS, *Le Cœur.*

"I LOVE them because they are so solemn and satisfied. Nothing ever changes them. Are they not strange?"

Madame Boisragon, as she said this, put one arm caressingly round the neck of the fat stone horse against which she was leaning and patted him as if he had been quite real. She included in that caressing gesture the whole strange family of stone men and animals that lined the little avenue leading up to the tomb of a princess who had long been dust. A river ran lazily between banks of high green reeds at the end of the avenue; and a stone landing-stage, once beautiful but now sadly broken and dilapidated, showed how mourners used to come hither ceremoniously by boat and burn their incense and pray their prayers at the tomb. There were also little marble arches, carved with dragons, leading the way up hither. These added to the picturesqueness of a site thickly shaded with old trees and guarded by heavy flanking walls now full of breaches, out of which grew shrubs and even willows.

All the statues and the animals ranged along this little avenue were enchanting because of their naïveté of posture and their immense squareness. First, in the most important place, stood two men. One was a massive warrior clad in a coat of mail, with his thick legs encased in buskins and with a helmet of a very ancient type on his head. He was also the possessor of a very square sword, which added to his grotesque fierceness. Immediately opposite him was a civil official, a bureaucrat of bureaucrats, clad in the almost womanlike Chinese robes of office. But as he belonged to the old heroic age, his costume had something of the flowing

grace of the early dynasties and not so much of the stiffness and neatness of the later Tartar garb. He belonged undeniably to the days when a rebellion might have been subdued by an apt quotation from the classics.

After these two figures came the great stiff-looking stone horses with their elephantine legs terminating in impossible hoofs, and their good-natured clumsy heads reflecting distress at their unchangeable fate. Everything was correctly curved on them—high saddles, heavy bridles, and quaint stirrups. A naked little boy, playing blissfully in the dirt, and occasionally digging up worms with his nimble fingers, explained by means of gestures that one steed belonged to the warrior and the other to the civil official. Each had his horse always ready to be mounted. Farther down the avenue, also ranged in pairs, were wise-looking tigers and leopards and other giant cats. As they squatted there comfortably on their haunches, they seemed almost to be waiting to be fed. The little naked boy appeared at first in some doubt as to why they were there, and shook his head at Kerr. Then, evidently remembering a half-forgotten solution, he ran quickly to the warrior and the civil official and with a rapid pantomime showed that in case of necessity both would mount their horses and drive away from the sleeping princess all such marauding beasts as tigers and leopards and panthers.

"The problem is now fully explained," said Peter Kerr with a laugh. "Your fat and satisfied men could apparently be defiant and dangerous. Nobody shall hurt the princess, is evidently their motto. They are the guardians of the tomb."

He walked across to the other stone horse and with an effort vaulted into the high-peaked stone saddle.

"They are comfortable steeds," he remarked. The little boy with wistful playfulness put up a dirty hand and seized the stone bridle. He would hold the horse to keep him quiet; and so like that he stood, no more noticed by the two than had he been a fly.

On the other side Madame Boisragon remained in the same attitude plunged in thought. Her big Terai hat, turned up behind and pinned down in front, hid her eyes; but Kerr understood from the expression on her lips that her thoughts had gone far away. He watched her curiously: against the great squat horse she made a suggestive figure. The dense groves of trees kept away the golden sunlight which was flooding and scorching the country through which they had just ridden; and the light which filtered through the branches left the stone walk in a curious *chiaroscuro,* restful, peaceful, and full of fancy. Kerr did not wonder that she did not speak.

Where the trees thinned away at the end of the avenue, the sunlight was pouring down so intensely that out in the full glare even the drab-coloured waters of the little river flashed and sparkled. The tumbled masonry and the dilapidated stone arches, their defects hidden in the distance, completed a charming vista. Sometimes a barge full of people would pass slowly along the river and remain in view for a few seconds through the narrow opening of the trees as the sweating trackers stamped their way along. Then the brilliant colouring of the Manchu women's dresses would mingle with the brown backs of men who sat half-stripped on the gunwales vigorously fanning themselves. It was like a piece of old Chinese pottery.

For on the farther bank of the river, beyond the great reeds of luscious green which looked so cool, was a red-walled temple, standing high up, and breaking the dazzling blue of the sky-line. It seemed as if all the colours in the world were out sunning themselves that day—not timid, washed-out colours, but brilliant, bold, splendid colours, such as are treasured up for all time in paintings and porcelains. The air was also full of the sounds of the fast-coming Chinese summer. Cicadas sung *wee, wee, wee,* in long, slow contentment, drawing out their notes indefinitely and filling the groves with their sounds. Big gauzelike dragon-flies, drawn from the river-banks by the promised shade and cool of the

trees, whisked suddenly to and fro in swarms. From the red-walled temple a flight of pigeons had just been unloosed and were now flying high in the skies to the musical whirring of the wooden whistles set under their wings. It was a wonderful day.

Madame Boisragon at length gave vent to a long sigh and withdrew her arm from the stone horse.

"Good old horse," she murmured with a final pat, as if she had been thinking of him all the while. She came forward, playing with her whip, which she bent almost in two between her hands.

"It is beautiful to-day," she said reflectively. "There is a curious poetry in the country around the old capital just now. It is a little Persian, a little Arabian, yet it is neither of the two. I wonder what it is."

She was standing right beside Kerr now; he slid to the ground before answering her.

"I am afraid I am not clever enough to find the right name," he said, "I can only illustrate it. Look!"

A barge had floated into the very middle of their narrow view of the river. Bathed in the dazzling sunlight, it looked, from the deep shade in which they were standing, almost unreal. A crowd of brilliantly-dressed Manchu women were sitting in groups or standing holding on the awning; and some youths, to entertain them, were playing native guitars and singing in a curious falsetto. For one instant the barge remained in full view; then, very gradually and very gently, it floated away.

"It is delightful," murmured Madame Boisragon. "It reminds me of a story I heard the other day."

She walked back a little and sat down on some stone steps.

"What is the story?" Kerr inquired, curious to hear her tell it.

"It is nothing much," she answered. "I do not know even if I can tell it. However——" She folded her hands and began:

"There was once an Emperor who wished to marry the

daughter of a Mohammedan monarch in Central Asia, so that he might extend his empire and also have an ally who would help him in case of rebellion. So he sent his ambassadors with presents to all the courts of the Khans to find a maiden who must be not only beautiful but the daughter of a powerful Prince as well. After some search the ambassadors found a suitable bride, and thereupon they presented their gifts and begged for the maiden's hand. Of course that was easily arranged, for the Emperor of China has always been a most desirable *parti*.

"But after the bride had set out on her long journey, across the thousands of miles of wastes, she became very sad, and by the time she arrived in Peking she was quite inconsolable. The Emperor, having promptly married her, soon noticed her condition.

"'What is it you want?' he cried. 'Ask for anything and it shall be given to you.'

"'You are very good,' the Princess replied. 'It is true that I am homesick. I think I would love a mosque with minarets and towers as in my own country, built where I can see it all day long. Perhaps that will comfort me.'

"The Emperor promptly set his most skilled workmen to work, and just outside the Palace a beautiful mosque was soon raised, and priests were brought from the country of the Princess to pray in her own language. And so that the Princess should be quite near, a great red pavilion with latticed windows was built overlooking the Palace Walls, and there she sat all day long.

"The story ends rather lamely, I am afraid. The Princess, in spite of the mosque, soon died, and her son, I believe, died soon afterwards, but at least you are shown the mosque and pavilion to-day, so the story is approximately true."

"It is a poetic little story," said Peter Kerr when she had finished, "and yet it does not say much for the life-preserving qualities of love. In the arms of the Emperor the Princess should have forgotten everything, and lived happy ever afterwards."

"Perhaps she was not at all in love," objected Madame Boisragon. "Very probably the Emperor was old and ugly —and she was merely a new plaything."

"Still," persisted Kerr, because he loved to argue with Madame Boisragon and startle her with unconventional ideas, "love is not dependent on age."

"I never said it was," she replied.

"But you said the Emperor was probably old and ugly," he objected, "which is much the same thing."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"A Chinese Emperor has very different ideas from ours."

He shot a look at her to see whether she was going to continue, and saw that she was not. So he went on.

"One wonders sometimes whether these people are really wrong or right in their ideas," he soliloquized, apparently watching the frantic but ineffective efforts of the naked little boy to clamber up one of the stone horses. He was making mad leaps, which were hopelessly ineffective.

"What ideas?" inquired Madame Boisragon. She was watching these antics too.

"Well," began Peter Kerr, "they are so matter-of-fact regarding women. If a man wants more than one wife, he takes her, and all is done so regularly and so seriously that there can really be no question of vice. Generally, I am told, the several wives are the best friends in the world and entertain one another admirably. The Mormons tried the experiment so as to be able to people a wilderness, but universal rage soon destroyed them. Asiatics, without any such utilitarian thoughts as the Mormons, have been practising the tenets of Brigham Young since the beginning of time, and yet nothing disastrous has happened to them. So it cannot be inherently vicious; it must be merely prejudice which makes us condemn the system."

"I think the idea is awful," protested Madame Boisragon, in a way which suggested she had never thought about it before.

Peter Kerr laughed. Somehow it always afforded him exquisite pleasure to try and shock her.

"That is all very well," he resumed, "but that is no argument. Monogamy can hardly be natural if it is only practised by about a third of mankind. That is unanswerable, it seems to me. In Asia, in Africa, and in the Pacific, polygamy is the natural state and a man gets as many wives as he likes. Periodically he replenishes his stock when he can afford to do so. It must be a charming existence—for those who can afford it! Most men, however, can only keep one wife; a great many men can afford no wife at all where the struggle for existence is frantic; and so the thing adjusts itself as far as numbers are concerned. Now if this were not a natural condition—if this were violating nature's laws—it could not possibly exist without bringing its own punishment. Yet look at this country. It is four thousand years old and has four hundred millions of people. It is absurd to pretend that it is immoral."

Madame Boisragon remained unconvinced.

"It is founded on a system which can only be bad," she said. "Why, may I ask, should a man have two wives any more than a woman two husbands?"

"That is again no answer," he cried, laughing at her. "I want to know why it is bad—why it is immoral."

"It is against Christianity," she replied, as if she did not know what to say.

"I knew that was coming," cried Peter Kerr triumphantly. "That is the argument of children and women. But are you sure you are really right? The Jews were tremendous polygamists: why should the Christians have suddenly changed it all? The change, I believe, is justified by a few doubtful words in the New Testament. Politics—Church politics—had much more to do with it than any natural or moral laws. Marriage by the Church only took place long after Europe had become Christian. Until the Church took things into its hands men were polygamous, but after that the priests were

clever enough to see that if they got the women on their side, they would be the absolute masters——"

"But where does all that lead you to?" interrupted Madame Boisragon. "You cannot set aside well-established customs and take two or three wives. I should like to see you try it."

"Monogamy is an artificial state," replied Peter Kerr obstinately. "It is not natural and never can be. And it is probably one of the real reasons why our civilization has become more artificial than any other in the world. We have to keep up a huge pretence about a really vital matter—and the result is bad."

"Still," persisted Madame Boisragon, "admitting all you say is correct, how are matters to be bettered? How can you now reconstruct European society? It is impossible."

"It is not impossible," rejoined Peter Kerr, now quite serious. "The old system of monogamy has served its purpose. It has made Europe. Now new forces are at work. A very few years ago divorce was impossible; now it is common. But divorce is only a *pis aller,* I will readily admit. Neither do I advocate the Asiatic system, since it is clumsy and belongs primarily to people whose peace of mind has not been disturbed by such things as modern inventions. But some day we will have the limited marriage contract—the contract expiring after due date. That is what we are fast coming to, and that is the proper solution. In the twenty-first or twenty-second century, five- or ten-year marriages will certainly be the vogue, I believe. Once you have legalized the fashion they will be looked upon as no more strange than the present lifelong marriage. You may say it is not polygamy, yet it is practically what the Chinese do to-day. A rich Chinaman first marries only one wife and after some years—generally ten or fifteen years—begins taking secondary wives. But his method is certainly inconvenient. The first wives become a nuisance—they are in the way. The Chinese method is unscientific; we would have to improve on it."

He laughed and turned to look at his companion. He was

enjoying himself a good deal; he felt rather than saw that she was angry with him.

"Wait one minute," said she, "and finish. Your grand argument is that man and woman are both inconstant, and that, like all the rest of the animal world, a change of mates from time to time would not only be desirable but be a real blessing."

"Certainly."

"Who would decide when the change should be made?"

"The legal document—the marriage contract, of course."

"But then, supposing one wished to renew and the other didn't—what would happen?"

"It would not be renewed."

"And you think that would work?"

"Of course; people would become accustomed to it."

"Well," said Madame Boisragon slowly, and with extraordinary earnestness, "I disagree with you utterly."

Peter Kerr laughed once more, and with that he recovered his levity entirely.

"Do you know anything about Thibet?" he inquired suddenly. Madame Boisragon shook her head, so he went on:

"Thibet is the only country in the world where there is no recorded friction in family life. There every woman has two husbands or more. All accounts I have read agree in saying that polyandry makes woman so happy that there actually is complete domestic peace. Her husbands obey her implicitly and work hard. It may not be a bit true, but it sounds pleasant—for the women."

Madame Boisragon turned and looked at him steadily.

"You are talking stupidly, I believe on purpose," she said.

"Stupidly?" he repeated in apparent surprise. "Well, I am sorry, I will stop. Perhaps it has sounded stupid. Yet I should have liked to tell you my system for dealing with the discarded husbands and wives. It is at least highly original."

He got up and walked to where the small boy was standing, feeling that once more she had held him off at arm's length.

The naked little waif was now looking intently skywards, and as Kerr approached him he uttered some unintelligible words and pointed upwards with his grimy fingers. The brilliant sunlight had been suddenly blotted out, and now across the skies ominous black clouds quickly advanced. It became so still that the alarmed twittering of the birds in the trees sounded unusually clear; whilst the dreamy choruses of the grasshoppers and the cicadas, which had imparted such an air of pleasant rural peace, soon magically ceased. From the clouds a cold, disturbing blast of air was blown down, and no sooner had she felt this than, as if an icy hand had touched her, Madame Boisragon started up with a little cry of alarm. She gazed apprehensively at the skies.

"What is it?" asked Kerr, retracing his steps.

"A thunder-storm is coming," she exclaimed in great agitation. "I simply hate thunder and lightning. You do not know what it means to me. They say the storms here are very bad. What shall we do out here in the open?"

She began wringing her hands. Then, without waiting for a reply, she started a little wildly down the avenue in search of the ponies. Kerr gazed after her with wondering eyes. A storm was only a storm. Why was she so alarmed?

But the *mafus,* already apprised of what was coming, were themselves running forward tugging the ponies after them, and Kerr began to understand that they were in for something bad. The prospect of the whole countryside being converted into an immense shower-bath was certainly not alluring.

"Large rain, large rain," called the *mafus* warningly to him in their mangled English, as a few heavy drops struck down on the ground with great force and the tree-tops were bent by a sudden blast of wind. The men ran the ponies along at a reckless pace and brought them to a standstill under a half-ruined pavilion. Then they set to work to make themselves as water-tight as possible. This consisted mainly in tying cloths around their heads and necks so that their precious hair should not be soaked; but also, with an eye to economy,

they took off their boots and socks and rolled their trousers high up. Like that they esteemed themselves fairly safe.

"We have apparently really got to see a big storm through," said Peter Kerr at length, not appreciating these preparations very much. It was going to spoil the afternoon. "We had better go and see if we can find better shelter near the tomb. The ponies are all right where they are. Come on."

Madame Boisragon hurried along after him as he made his way through a small gateway into an inner courtyard. The rank undergrowth here invaded the very stone pathways, making it necessary for him to kick his way ungracefully forward. The century-old trees, standing thickly together, would have made the brightest day seem dim: now, with the great black clouds piling ever more thickly on top of one another in the skies, it was as if an ugly night were fast falling. The change seemed almost miraculous.

For a second or two the cold wind blew as at the beginning of a howling gale; then it ceased, and suddenly great streaks of blue-white light flashed dazzlingly above. *Crack, crack, crack*—a series of tremendous peals of thunder rang out, as if all the artillery in the world had been fired off at once from the mountains to the northwest. It was stunning.

Peter Kerr stopped and turned hurriedly. He himself was beginning to be alarmed. A stream of cries caught his ears as the *mafus* shouted at and chided the terrified ponies in excited Chinese shrieks. It reminded him of a scene he had read of in some boy's book of adventure, when a couple of men, pursued into a great cave by a band of savage South American Indians, had as a last resource fired off barrel after barrel of their guns, raising such a thunder of sound that blind terror had promptly ensued. But where was Madame Boisragon?

"Where are you?" he called loudly in alarm. Where had she disappeared to? He ran back, looking everywhere.

"Here, here," answered her voice piteously at last, as the last peals of thunder died away, and the rain began coming down in earnest. He found her crouching down so low

under a tree as to be completely hidden. He made a dive and pulled her hastily out.

"It's all right now," he protested, fearing nevertheless that the next flashes would discredit him before he had finished speaking. "What we have to look out for now is the rain. It is going to rain like the Deluge—quick!"

Even as he spoke the rain seemed to thicken until it formed ropes of water. With a jerk he swung his companion into his arms and rushed down the pathway to the rear of the tomb. The rain, driven forcibly along by the mountain winds, struck through his clothing as if it had been mere paper. Drenched through and through during his short run, he had yet the satisfaction of knowing that his burden was half sheltered; and gaining the lea of the tomb, he set her down with relief.

Fortune was with them. A great hole had been made in the massive walls of the tomb by the gradual falling away of the brickwork, and it only needed a few kicks and pulls to dislodge a further mass of crumbled mortar and earth. Then by crouching down and pressing very close together it was possible for them both to defy the elements in comparative safety.

"Do not be frightened," he said to her, wiping the trickles of water from her pale face with his soddened handkerchief. "We are at least safe here—quite safe."

This was a curious end to their discussion, he thought, as he watched the rain.

CHAPTER XVIII

"Il est bien difficile de garder un trésor dont tous les hommes ont la clef."—*Trésor du monde, Book II.*

THE storm passed as it had come—in a flash. For a quarter of an hour, perhaps, the lightning had dazzled and the thunder had rumbled unceasingly, but it was never as bad as the opening had been. The battle in the air was moving far away to the southeast, at the rate of thirty or forty miles an hour, the atmosphere being attacked and cleansed in Titanic haste, and the rain, pouring down in one continuous sheet, soon muffled the more menacing music of the heavens.

Then, just as the lightning and thunder had somehow disappeared, so had the rain, in spite of the most frantic efforts, become discouraged. From being a veritable deluge it became only heavy rain; then just plain rain; and at last, with a final spurt of discontent, as if the last remains of a Gargantuan watering-can were being emptied on the luckless country, it suddenly ceased. The sun peeped out low down on the western horizon, infinitely pale at first, as if it too had been water-washed. Yet, as the last beaten clouds chased away to the south and the rain-mists faded into thin air, it deepened quickly to a ruddier hue, and a great rainbow stretched its glorious arc sheer across the skies, in token, as the babies say, that never again shall there be a Flood. And in this wise, once again did it become a beautiful afternoon.

It was different, however, from what it had been before. Now, though the insects began their chirpings anew, and the birds twittered ever-growing choruses of relief, all was in a minor key, subdued as if to accord with the newly-

born afternoon. It was much cooler; it was much fresher; there was not a particle of dust in the air; but most of all, tingling the nostrils and dominating everything else, was the wholesome, unaccustomed smell of good red earth. Nature, refreshed and rejoicing, was no longer in a languorous mood. She had finished with that for to-day. It was as if she were reclining after great athletics which had been followed by copious ablutions. The beasts felt it, the birds felt it, the very insects felt it. No wonder that even unsensitive man should understand the great change which had come.

Madame Boisragon and Peter Kerr, forsaking their shelter, mounted their ponies a little silently and rode off quickly. The water-logged country opened out before them in a vista of glistening green full of irregular lakelets. Men, with their trousers tightly rolled up to their thighs and cloths round their heads, were wading here and there slowly and disconsolately, engaged in fishing things out of the flood. The little naked brown children had all disappeared, and only now and again could a wistful little face or two be seen peeping out of broken paper windows, or from a half-closed door. Oh, why had the cruel heavens spoilt the great playground? the little faces seemed to say.

A faint flush came to Madame Boisragon's face as her pony splashed and floundered with leaps and bounds through the great pools of water left on the sunken roads; and once or twice she shot a rapid glance at her escort as if to divine his thoughts. But Kerr, steaming in his wet clothes as he warmed up from the exercise exactly as his soddened pony was doing, said nothing at all. He seemed to be entirely occupied with picking his way—almost to have forgotten her existence.

She would have liked him to be as talkative as he usually was; with the storm over and done with, she felt immensely relieved and wished to show it. They had sat for nearly one whole hour in the sheltering hole so close together that the warmth of their bodies had intermingled and made them

almost as one. The immediate effect on her had been to abate her fear, to make her almost indifferent to the storm; the effect on him had been to make him strangely silent. He had not even tried to make love to her under the guise of comforting her, as he might easily have done and as she had half expected he would do, from what she knew of him. He had only become strangely and unaccountably silent—as if he had said all he had to say. And then, before the rain had entirely stopped, she remembered that it was he who had first got up and suggested that it was worth while trying to return home.

Why had he done it? She puzzled her brain trying to solve the problem, and as she could find no solution, a curious irritation grew up within her. Why had he drawn back—why had he feigned indifference—why did he not say a word now? And so, thinking in this way, by the time they had reached the first flanking gate of the city, always riding in the same silence, Madame Boisragon was so sure that she was really put out that she had no trouble in showing it.

"Thank you," she called sarcastically after Peter Kerr, who, in order to clear the way for her, had pressed rapidly ahead, and had inevitably sent back great splashes of black mud from his pony's hoofs. A little had even hit on her cheeks, and as she reined in and rubbed it off with her handkerchief she seemed pinker than her wont.

"I am awfully sorry," Kerr apologized somewhat lamely, after they had safely negotiated this city gate and the broken bit of stoneway beyond. But already they were cantering quickly on the soddened sand stretches under the Tartar Wall, with the ponies tugging hard at their bits as their instinct told them they were racing home. Yet she, on her part, did not wish to get home so quickly.

"Oh, don't apologize, pray," she cried ironically in return when she was able. "A little more mud can make no difference now." And with that she resolutely paid him no further attention.

Droves of shaggy ponies were here being driven along

towards the main city entrances by wild-looking mounted men, armed with pointless wooden lances; and these ponies showed such a desire to stampede after them that there was really scant excuse to talk. And then there was another gateway to battle with; for a fierce traffic, long held in suspense by the storm, was now unloosening itself in a savage hurry, and close attention to possible dangers was necessary. And so it came to pass that the hotel was reached without further words being spoken.

They rode their sweating ponies into the courtyard to find that another home-coming had just taken place. Tall, thin, polite Mr. Smith, with his hat off and the perspiration beading his forehead, was stroking down a weather-worn pony, as if in sympathy for the sad state to which the weather had reduced them both; and seated on the wet stone steps, looking more fantastic than ever, was the strange little Mrs. Hopeful, calmly engaged in pulling up a pair of mud-spattered stockings. The ring of hoofs made the two look up, and instantly the little woman dropped her stockings and burst out laughing.

"What, you too?" she called to them without getting up, laughing more and more. "I thought we were bad enough, but you—— Oh, dear!"

She went off into fresh fits as their plight was made increasingly manifest to her. Then with an effort she recovered herself.

"Poor Madame Boisragon," she said, going up to her as Kerr helped her off her pony. "I am really awfully sorry that you got such a ducking. You don't mind my laughing, do you? Jack and I have been wading through mud and water. I am wet up to here," pointing to her waist. "But you two—you must have swum!"

Madame Boisragon laughed back. She was quite happy, since she was only out of humour with one particular man. She even stretched out an arm to show Mrs. Hopeful how soddened she really was. The tall, thin man, immensely embarrassed because of his own condition, was trying to

show a polite yet distant interest in things, and now offered Kerr a cigarette. Kerr, however, did not make any attempt to make himself agreeable; he smoked his cigarette calmly and waited for the two women to finish their gossiping.

"We shall all catch our deaths of colds, Mrs. Hopeful," said Madame Boisragon at length, as she gave her pony a farewell carrot and came up the steps.

"Never," cried the little woman; "we must all have brandy, and then it will be all right. Come on, everybody."

She led the way unconcernedly indoors, rushing into the hall like a whirlwind.

"Carnot," she called, "Carnot! Where is the omnipotent, omnipresent Carnot?"

Several *boys* dawdling on benches started towards her; she waved them peremptorily away.

"I don't want you," she expostulated, stamping her foot. "I want Carnot. Where is Carnot—where is your master?"

Whilst they were trying to explain that he was out of the hotel, Lorenzo appeared and politely saluted her in his elaborate way.

"Oh," she cried, "how fortunate—how very fortunate—the very man! I want you so badly, Mr. Lorenzo."

The Italian, immaculately clad in a dark blue suit, and looking cool and clean, assured her that he had expressly come downstairs to be of service to her. As he spoke he studied with amused eyes the soddened little crowd. It pleased him to see that Kerr looked embarrassed.

"After saying that, though it isn't a bit true, you can't be angry, Mr. Lorenzo," continued the little woman, looking at him appealingly and shivering her skirts. "We want some of that beautiful cognac of yours in little glasses, to save us from dying of colds. Will you save us?"

"Why, most certainly," Lorenzo replied, for though his cognac was precious, he liked to appear generous.

Gallantly enough he led the way into the dining-room and sent his servant for a bottle of the precious brandy. Then, filling their glasses, he toasted the occasion; and taking

no denial, he insisted on filling them once more. It was a great sacrifice, but *noblesse oblige!*

The little Englishwoman drank her share down like a man.

"It always goes to my head and makes me dreadfully hilarious," she whispered to Madame Boisragon, catching her affectionately by the hand. "But you won't be shocked, will you? It is so nice having you here," she continued. "I never, never see you, you know—excepting just by chance like this. It is cruel! Won't you join us to-night in a little dinner-party?"

Madame Boisragon's eyes were now sparkling from the effect of the exercise followed by the brandy. Mrs. Hopeful looked at her so appealingly that she did not know what to say.

"I would really like to," she answered, "but you know——" She hesitated.

"There can be no but," cried the little Englishwoman vehemently. "I say it must be: I have decided it. Listen."

She addressed all of them generally, thumping on the table.

"It has been decided that we all dine together to-night at eight o'clock more or less, so as to end this stormy day properly. I will tell Carnot to let us have his little dining-room. Mr. Lorenzo, are you agreeable?"

"Madame, can you ask?" answered the Italian. "I shall be of course very much honoured." He inclined his head in his formal way.

"Splendid! I have committed Madame Boisragon; Jack never counts: there only remains Mr. Kerr. Of course he will come. It is arranged!"

Without waiting for anything else, she gave orders that Carnot must have the little room prepared for five people by eight o'clock, and that the cook should exert himself. Then she nodded a farewell and rushed away to change.

It was after eight o'clock before they had all assembled again. Lorenzo had had to go out; both the other men had had letters claiming their attention; and the two ladies

had doubtless employed the time in resting. Carnot, with his usual energy, had converted the dingy little room he called the private dining-room into a more inviting place. With the aid of flowers and a blackwood screen it had assumed such a changed look that little Mrs. Hopeful clapped her hands with delight when she saw it.

"Carnot," she exclaimed impulsively as he stood smiling in front of her, "you actually have ideas, and in spite of your sins, some day should make your fortune. Now help a little more. Here is my contribution to the evening's festivities."

She dropped an armful of Chinese embroideries on to a chair and began deftly arranging them round the room. Chinese mandarin robes of gorgeous colouring and pleated women's skirts—articles which in those days of a decade ago were sometimes of wonderful embroidery—shared the distinction of being suspended at different angles and from different objects. The little woman's bizarre taste soon converted the room into a veritable curio-shop. It was really pretty.

"Now we are ready," she called, going to the door. "Come, Madame Boisragon—come quickly, *le diner de la table d'hôte est servi!*"

Madame Boisragon, who had been occupying herself turning over the leaves of an ancient illustrated paper, came in quickly, and taking hold of the Englishwoman by the hand, smilingly whispered something into her ear.

"How absurd!" protested Mrs. Hopeful, throwing back her head and laughing. "What does it matter? I don't know him from Adam either. Yet he can be amusing, and that is the principal thing. However, to oblige you——"

She went to the door and met the three men, who were coming in together.

"Jack, don't laugh," she exclaimed impulsively. "I have just realized that perhaps some of us don't really know one another. It is awfully silly, you know, but to save trouble I am going to pretend to introduce you all."

Half laughing and half serious, first she seized Lorenzo, and twisting him around, announced his name. Then she began doing the same to the other two, stopping before she had properly finished and rushing to the table. They did not know exactly how to take it: men are often so much more stupid than women.

"Now that we know one another more or less," she cried, "I am going to arrange the table. It's like a Chinese puzzle —you will observe there are three men and two women. However, I have the solution."

She twisted them here and there until she finally had everybody to her satisfaction. Kerr found himself between her and Madame Boisragon. On the opposite side were Lorenzo and Mr. Smith. The ends of the table had been purposely left vacant.

"You see," she explained, whilst everybody, excepting Kerr, protested that the arrangement was bad, "I want to talk to Mr. Lorenzo and I like to talk to my vis-à-vis, for then I can lean my arms on the table and be generally ill-mannered. If I put Jack on my side, he would either have to be next to me, which would be stupid, or be in the corner where I couldn't see him. And following that, either Mr. Kerr or Madame Boisragon would have to cross over. Mr. Lorenzo would then probably not talk to me. If, on the other hand, I put Mr. Kerr across the table, Jack would be absorbed in somebody else, which I couldn't possibly permit! Now do you see what a genius I have shown? You will soon be happy."

Her voluble and intricate explanations having reduced every one to submission, she beckoned to her own servant and whispered something into his ear. Whilst they were still talking he returned. He carried on a tray five little glasses all ablaze.

"My own special brew," she explained with sparkling eyes. "You absolutely must," she continued, leaning forward and insisting that Madame Boisragon take the glass which Kerr

was offering to her. "I call it the devil's brew: after you have drunk it anything in the world becomes possible. It is the ideal drink for Peking when things are dull."

Lorenzo, who was interested in finding out the secret of this new invention, began plying her with questions, and turned to Mr. Smith for help when Mrs. Hopeful refused to divulge her recipe. He found the contents of the little glass excellent, he said; for, like most Latins, Lorenzo did not really love ice-cold cocktails as an appetite-giver, and infinitely preferred something fantastic.

Peter Kerr, with a minute to himself, turned to Madame Boisragon and murmured something to her as he raised his glass. She was dressed in a black gown covered with soft white lace round her throat, and he thought she had never looked better. Once again the thought rose to his mind that there was something in the way she sat suggestive of the unapproachable nun.

"I am glad you have found your tongue again," she answered impassively after a pause, as she sipped her little glass. "I wondered what was the matter with you. The wet oughtn't to make you glum. In England doesn't it always rain?"

"Perhaps it wasn't the wet," he suggested, trying to meet her eyes.

"Oh!" she answered, breaking her bread, and carefully watching the men on the opposite side as she spoke. "Perhaps, then, you were angry with me for behaving so stupidly at the beginning of the storm."

"No, certainly not."

He set down his little glass. "Won't you guess again?" he continued.

She shook her head; something told her that there was danger in his voice.

"What is the use of guessing?" she answered with studied indifference. "You will invent something. You are always doing that, to lead me on to catch me. It is simply a ruse on your part."

Mrs. Hopeful had finished her explanations and now leaned forward.

"Madame Boisragon," she said warningly, shaking a finger, "I shall change Mr. Kerr promptly if you monopolize him. I warn you."

Kerr came to the rescue.

"Unless you amuse us, we must amuse ourselves," he protested to the little woman.

"In a minute I will amuse you, I promise you," she cried. "Yes, stupid, now of course," she said in an aside to the *boy* who was claiming her attention. The *boy* turned and corks popped violently.

"This is a dinner *à la russe,*" she explained, "with only one wine. You must empty your glasses each time you drink, and of course in the end you will have to become drunk like the Russians."

"Elsie!" protested the tall, thin man, whilst the others laughed.

"How absurd you are, Jack! Of course I mean those who want to get drunk if they please. Have you ever been properly drunk, Mr. Lorenzo?"

She laughed uproariously at her own question, and the Italian met her in the same spirit. He declared that getting drunk after the polished manner of the connoisseur was one of his most cherished pursuits. The conversation having become general, the dinner quickly progressed.

"You have not yet carried out your promise and really amused us, Mrs. Hopeful," said Kerr later on, during a pause. "Now that you have put us all in the humour, amuse us properly."

Mrs. Hopeful thought a minute, and suddenly laid down her knife and fork and pushed her plate away.

"I have the very thing," she exclaimed. "I will tell you about a Chinese theatre Jack and I went to a few days ago. It was the most curious thing I have ever seen. It consisted merely of what may be called the primitive love-scene. It

was really wonderful. Jack, do you remember?" She looked laughingly across the table.

The tall, thin man suddenly coloured to the roots of his hair. He fingered his tie; he pulled at his cuffs; he was the personification of embarrassment.

"I say, Elsie," he protested nervously, "there is a limit, you know. You couldn't possibly tell that story here. I mean to say——" He stopped and looked at her imploringly.

Lorenzo was smiling all over. He always delighted to see this curious pair fence with each other. They were quite beyond him. He had even made a *mot* about them which was quite clever, but which need not be set down here.

"Do not disappoint us, Mrs. Hopeful," he begged, with a curious expression coming into his eyes. "You have whetted our appetites: you must go on. Never mind Mr. Smith."

"I cannot listen to it," said the tall, thin man with sudden resolution. "Elsie!"

"Jack," interrupted the little woman with a violent stamp of her foot, as if it irritated her to be argued with before others, "Jack!"

He raised his eyes to hers unwillingly, as if he had divined what was coming.

"Now, Jack, be quiet—do you hear?"

With a sudden movement her whole body seemed to stiffen and her eyes became like saucers. She fixed and held them on the man for perhaps three seconds and no more. Then as suddenly she relaxed herself and dropped her hands on her lap. The tall, thin man, like a rabbit which has miraculously escaped the charming of some snake, sat stupidly silent. It was over very quickly.

"Madonna Santa!" murmured the Italian to himself as he understood what had happened. Kerr gazed blankly between the two men opposite him as if he were totally unaware of this strange display; yet he liked it so little that he sat very still for many minutes afterwards. As for Madame Boisragon, for some reason the colour rushed

to her pale face and her eyes became brighter, Alone the servants, with Eastern impassiveness, preserved their unaltered demeanour.

"Bother!" said the little woman finally, passing a hand across her forehead in the midst of the sudden silence which had come. "That's put me in the wrong mood for story-telling—oh yes, entirely the wrong mood! You must give me a few seconds." Her eyes wandered vaguely round the room.

Finally she drank a little Pommery and took up her knife and fork again. Suddenly she laid them down.

"I have it," she said in a far-away voice, as if she were speaking to herself. "I shall tell it differently, that is all. I love to tell stories—or to write them in little verses which have no conclusion. There will be more foreground—much more foreground—the play will be far in the background, an incident, an explanation. Also I shall end abruptly and you will have to guess most of the story. And yet it will show what I wish to show."

She settled herself thoughtfully and then began. There was a curious magnetism about her which radiated from her whole personality and fixed the attention of the entire little party.

"Have you ever seen a Chinese theatre?" she said conversationally. "If not, let me introduce you properly, for you have to begin at the beginning really to understand.

"The theatre never finds itself in too distinguished a neighbourhood. It is generally up some noisome lane where the plaster is falling from the walls and where there are hideous stains everywhere; and along the lane you will see, what you rarely see in China at night, women at the street-doors—women with bold, defiant, painted faces. As they stand there they will sometimes even stretch out their hands and smirk and smile. In this lane there will also probably be, wedged in between dead walls which are curiously out of place, butchers' and bakers' shops, with numbers of rough-looking loutish apprentices wearing soiled blue aprons attend-

ing to the night customs and making an uproarious din. In the light of the smoky lamps you can easily see that it is simply Europe of the age of Rabelais. The butcher-boys will be hacking off ribs of pork with square-looking choppers, and shouting away ugly-looking dogs which creep with infinite cunning between their very legs; or, if their work is finished, they will stand grouped together with their greasy arms akimbo, leering at the women and exchanging jests. The baker-boys will be busy no matter what the hour may be, for their custom never ceases, and almost all night you may hear the smack and rattle of their thin rolling-pins as they handle masses of rough-looking dough and sing the praises of their cakes to the crowds that pass in monotonous chants.

"All sorts of people come along on their way to the theatre—rich men and poor men, men in silk and satins, and men in cotton and rags—all sorts and conditions of men mixing impartially in the wonderful democracy of the East. For if the play is not a historical play, it will be merely a series of presentations of vice rewarded. It will be openly immoral—extraordinarily gross. I call it vice rewarded. The men, therefore, go to whet their appetites, and nothing else. In well-ordered cities these plays are condemned to mat-sheds which must be erected outside city limits, but just now, as things are a little disordered in the empire, everything is permitted.

"Jack and I strayed into this particular theatre by chance just as it was getting dark, and we left after one piece, which was all we could really stand. It was primitive Romeo and Juliet. This is what we saw.

"There was a great crowd sitting silently on rough benches which rose tier after tier until a sort of gallery was reached where people were standing or walking about. The air was thick with the smell of all this humanity—the smell was the essential atmosphere. One piece had just been ended, and proceeding from somewhere behind, in anticipation of the raising of the curtain, was a noisy, weird music

made with flutes and flageolets and brass cymbals, all pitched very high and making the oddest intervals.

"This music ended abruptly with the beating of a muffled gong, and then the curtains swung off the stage to the right and left and disclosed a throng of brilliantly-dressed people who bowed and walked to and fro and then very slowly melted away. This was a sort of prologue, I suppose, to illustrate the human comedy; for the next thing we realized was that a small-footed and very much affected young woman, all painted and powdered, had tottered on to the stage and seated herself in a chair. After a pause she took from the table beside her a little looking-glass, and during a few seconds gave a marvellous sketch of female vanity. She was in love with her own beauty—that was quite plain; she thought she was exquisite, perfect—everything that could be desired.

"But soon she sighed and showed that something was lacking. Then she picked up a book, only to throw it down with eloquent gestures showing that she could not read. A door opened, and an old woman, an *amah,* appeared carrying tea, which she spread before her mistress. These two talked for a while—the mistress plainly showing her ennui, the old servant seeking with marvellous touches to put her into a better humour. You must remember that for us it was pure pantomime: yet I do not think that we really missed a word.

"Presently the *amah* retired, and then returned bearing a little pewter jug of wine, which she began heating over a brazier. Soon she poured out a cup for her mistress and offered it to her. The mistress refused petulantly; was tempted again; relaxed a little; and finally accepted and gingerly sipped the little cup. The old woman cunningly filled the cup immediately it was empty and pressed it once more on her. This time the young woman needed no persuasion; she drank it down quickly. At once the *amah* cast a cautious look round her and began artfully whispering into the young woman's ear. At first the young woman almost

jumped up in her righteous indignation: the old woman returned to the pewter jug and plied her with wine again. Gradually the young woman began to give way; her head nodded drowsily; and at length she suffered the *amah* to lead her off to the back of the stage, where she disappeared behind some curtains.

"The lights on the stage had suddenly become dimmed, and like a shadow the old *amah* now passed across to another door. A few seconds elapsed and she entered again—behind her coming Romeo, a handsome young man, immaculately dressed. The old *amah* made a few gestures; the young man poured money into her hand; and then stealthily he disappeared where his lady love had gone. . . ."

Mrs. Hopeful stopped suddenly and laughed hysterically, as if she were infinitely amused. You could have heard a pin fall in the little dining-room.

"You have all become wonderfully attentive," she said, looking round the table, "but I am afraid I simply cannot conclude. I can only refer you to a certain poem of our own incomparable Shakespeare. The final departure of the young man was a wonderful piece of acting. But there were details after that which were an education in themselves of the Oriental mind.

"Jack," she said, leaning across the table, "do you remember that last little touch between the *amah* and the mistress after the Fall?"

The tall, thin man coloured desperately once more.

"Elsie," he said finally, "how can you?"

"How can I what?" she replied sharply. "I have said nothing: I have only conjured up the scene for you once more. Madame Boisragon," she continued, turning to the Frenchwoman, "I ask you is there anything in what I have told you unfit for a grown-up responsible person to hear?"

Lorenzo did not let her reply.

"But, Mrs. Hopeful, we are waiting for the dénouement," he said in absolute calmness; "surely you will not con-

clude in the middle. You have only brought us up to where the lovers meet in the retirement of the enchanted alcove. It must have been just then that things became interesting."

Mrs. Hopeful suddenly collapsed in her chair and went into little shrieks of laughter, as if the memory of what had occurred was too much for her.

"Oh, oh, my dear Mr. Lorenzo," she finally gasped, "some day, when I know you better, I may whisper you everything down to the very last details. I shall make a Chinese theatre-goer of you yet!"

The dinner was practically concluded, and somehow with the end of Mrs. Hopeful's story nobody had very much to say. Mr. Smith looked as if he wanted to go.

"Cannot we prolong the entertainment a little?" said Kerr mischievously as they lighted cigarettes. "Mrs. Hopeful, you who have so many ideas, suggest something."

She blew a reflective little cloud of smoke from her lips.

"Do you believe in spirits?" she asked abruptly.

"Certainly—if it is necessary."

"And you, Mr. Lorenzo?"

The Italian smiled and made a curious deprecative gesture.

"Credo in un Dio crudel che m'ha creato," he quoted dramatically. "After that nothing is impossible. So I will believe in anything."

"We are a crowd of believers, then," mused Mrs. Hopeful. "What a pity we are only five! Seven is the mystic number; without seven nothing is any use."

She looked at a tiny watch on her bracelet.

"It is a nuisance it is so late," she exclaimed, "otherwise I could get two more men—a rather mad American and a superstitious Spaniard. They would do admirably. However, I shall remember, and one day we can have a proper séance. Let me tell you about the Spaniard."

She launched out into an entertaining description of how he had arrived from gay Madrid to find everything here terrible to his artistic soul. The place was a nightmare, he proclaimed—the women ice-cold, the men brutes.

Mrs. Hopeful was still describing the man when an altercation at the door stopped her. The servants were trying to prevent some one from coming in, and they were not succeeding. Lorenzo turned and then instantly jumped up. First asking permission, he motioned to the servants to stand aside and let the intruder in. A tall Chinaman, in high riding-boots and official clothes, showing that he had ridden straight from his masters to this destination, came quickly in, and bending a knee after the Manchu fashion to Lorenzo, took a big envelope from a red portfolio and handed it over. Then with a bow he quickly disappeared.

"I think I must ask you to excuse me," said the Italian, not seating himself again. "You see my business calls me, though the hour is late." And without further explanation he left.

"Jack, I think we must go too," said the little woman, rising a few minutes later. "Mr. Kerr, I am sure you will see Madame Boisragon safely upstairs."

The two went a little silently up to their rooms. They had nothing much to say, for it had been a long day and perhaps they were tired.

"Good-night," said Madame Boisragon when she reached her door, holding out her hand.

"Good-night," said Kerr, taking it and not releasing it at once. She had already opened her door; it was dark within.

"They have not lighted your lamps," he remarked, after a brief pause, searching for his match-box and trying to talk calmly. He struck a match and went in: he felt rather than saw that she was following. Suddenly he dropped the match with an exclamation as it burnt him. They were in the dark together now. Yielding to an irresistible impulse, he turned and held her fast.

"I love you," he said, breathing quickly.

"Oh no! Oh no!" she protested, trying to pull away.

His answer was lost as he went to heaven against her lips.

CHAPTER XIX

"Il y a mes amis qui m'aiment, mes amis qui ne se soucient pas du tout de moi, et mes amis qui me détestent."—CHAMFORT.

MRS. HOPEFUL balanced herself on the points of her toes and pouted.

"Don't be so silly, Jack," she expostulated. "What has to be done *must* be done, especially when people write their Days with a capital D. That means the imperative. It is a bore, of course, but, my dear Jack, we cannot change the world."

Though the little woman pretended to laugh as she concluded this speech, she looked at the man with anxious eyes; for was she not purposely avoiding the main issue and hoping that he would not bring it up?

Tall Mr. Smith, unconvinced and somewhat unhappy, still stood between her and the waiting cart. He did not want her to go a bit. If she went, why couldn't he go too? It was a stupid world, and his looks showed his displeased appreciation of the fact. The carter, who was waiting to drive the lady to her destination, regarded the two as they fenced with the unmoving phlegm of his race. He was in the foreign trade; and if he had told all the funny things he had seen since the day he had begun to drive these strange outlanders, his countrymen would have called him mad.

"How long will you be, Elsie?" said Mr. Smith finally, as if he had secretly decided to capitulate but was ashamed to say so openly. He fingered his tie and his thin wisp of a moustache alternately, as if that double action brought him comfort. Yet hang it—it was a beastly bore! "How long will you really be?" he repeated.

Mrs. Hopeful, confronted with a pointed question, drew

up her shoulders sharply and held them thus, at the same time spreading out her hands. She could be a very expressive little person.

"How long?" she exclaimed. "Dear me, don't ask! That depends on the cats! If there is much catting, I may be rather long. Women are often so odious to one another: and you see I may have to scratch back. Otherwise it will be over with refreshing suddenness. In the latter case, I shall go in, drink a cup of tea, and then fly back. Dear Jack—cousin mine—go for a walk, and shake up your liver! It must be that which is worrying you. I shall have plenty to tell you when I get back, I warrant you. Think how lucky you are in that you are not a woman!"

Tall, thin Mr. Smith, thus variously adjured, finally resigned himself to the inevitable. He would try to kill time alone, he said mournfully with the air of a martyr. Reluctantly he placed himself so that with the aid of the carter's little bench Mrs. Hopeful could now vault on to the blue cushions of the cart. She shot a last glance at him, to see if he was really safe, and then, with the lightness of a bird, up she jumped. The old carter promptly removed the little bench and gathered up his hempen reins. There had been enough of this trifling; so unceremoniously, with the expressive tongue-clacking and sudden ejaculations of his trade, he started his mule.

"*Au revoir,* Jack," called the little woman, opening her parasol as the cart jogged forward. She balanced herself to the rocking of the cart with the glee of a girl. "Jack" waved his hand a little vaguely, as if he were thinking hard, and then turned and slowly re-entered the hotel. Mrs. Hopeful smiled to herself. She had won her battle and would pay her call alone. Men *are* so stupid—sometimes.

"*Kuai-kuai-ti,* hurry up, old man," she urged the carter, looking at the little watch on her bracelet. The old carter, duly apprised that his fare was in a hurry, allowed his harmless whip to descend on the mule's tough hide in frequent and quite ineffective castigations. The old mule had the

pace which the gods had given her—why hurry or worry? Mrs. Hopeful, with her legs swinging to and fro as she sat on the shafts, much as a circus-rider sits her steed between the intervals of hoop-jumping, nodded and laughed at two or three acquaintances she passed on the road. She had fallen very quickly into local ways, and she could now sit this peculiar conveyance with any man. In any case, it was only a step to her destination. No sooner had she passed in through the big Legation Gates than she jumped from her seat with the agility of a boy.

"Now, wait here, do you understand, old man?" she said with a vigorous pantomime.

The old carter smiled at her as if she had been his child, and this time showed that he understood most remarkably well by nonchalantly producing a little pipe and making careful preparations to smoke.

"Hao-la, hao-la," he said reassuringly. He had done this thing a thousand times; yet every time he drove these foreigners they acted like this—as if he would fly away!

Mrs. Hopeful threw a last glance at her muslin dress, and wondered whether it was much crumpled behind. Then, without deciding this difficult point, she closed her parasol with a snap.

"Here goes," she said to herself, with a deep breath, as if she were about to take a cold bath. She would not have dreamed of confessing it, but she was in her heart of hearts a little nervous. This diplomatic world—stiff, cold, unsympathetic—was her bugbear.

At the front door two attentive *boys* tried to relieve her of her parasol.

"No, stupids," she caustically remarked, "that goes in with me. Which door?"

The servants threw open an entrance: Mrs. Hopeful dived through. It was really stupid of her to be so nervous—but the idea of cats. . . .

A murmur of voices came from somewhere in the middle distance. The murmur died down, and then ceased as her

footsteps sounded the alarm. Mrs. Hopeful, a little blinded by the fierce glare on the streets, blinked her eyes for a moment in doubt.

"We are out here," called a voice, and Mrs. Hopeful, hurrying forward, came to a window opening on to a cool verandah. Though it was so early, half-a-dozen people were already out there having tea. Mrs. Hopeful sought her hostess and shook hands.

"We are so glad it's only you," said Baroness Waffen, lazily greeting her. "Monsieur de Boyar was just beginning a story which he swears he will tell *en petite comité.* In fact, if he allows you to listen at all, you may count yourself among the elect. Sit down, my dear, and be prepared to be amused. Do you know the others?"

The Baroness Waffen began pouring out tea. The Baroness had a certain *cachet* of her own. Once she had had almost permanently attached to her as *cavalière servante* a distinguished K.C.B. The honourable gentleman's lettering was translated as "Knight Commander of the Baroness," and immoderate laughter was his lot, for he had passed the age for such attachments. As for the Baroness, being a woman, she drew therefrom a certain renown which made her interesting without being really wicked. She was withal a singularly agreeable person, and Mrs. Hopeful liked her exceedingly.

"I am sure," said Mrs. Hopeful, "that if Monsieur de Boyar tells a story, I shall duly scream with laughter."

The thin Russian secretary who was to amuse them made his face even more ratlike than usual and then bowed with mock gravity. He was a perfect *raconteur,* and he knew it. In four languages, it was said, he could tell the same story equally well—that is, equally absurdly. It was a great gift, such as Russians often have.

"You will not betray me," he first begged of Mrs. Hopeful, with his hands folded as in prayer.

Mrs. Hopeful laughed gaily. Her relief was great. Things were so different from what she anticipated.

"Proceed in peace," she said, fixing on him her great staring eyes. "I am above suspicion, I assure you."

De Boyar crossed his spider-like legs and cracked the joints of his hands. In spite of his charming manner, he had singularly ugly and clawlike hands, which for some reason he persisted in bringing into prominence.

"It is all about a youthful colleague of mine," he began conversationally in his purring English, "a colleague who is now in Petersburg. Nearly all of you know Kornoff, since he was here up to three months ago, so I will not describe him.

"Kornoff is a thorough Russian—that is, he is very casual, and nothing matters to him. Kornoff's great *mot* is that if there is a way in there must be equally well a way out, which is rather good philosophy. This spring, as he had been playing much tennis with the daughter of the Belgian commercial *attaché,* some people, of course, thought that it would be very nice if he married her. People are always so kind."

De Boyar's ratlike eyes jumped from face to face, and at length fixed themselves on the most disapproving countenance in the circle, which belonged to a Mrs. Jackson. He liked to have that sort of inspiration, he said, for he was quite impervious to frowns and silent condemnation. So, having found what he sought, he now went on:

"One day his friend little Bolivar, who represents Chili, went round to see him, and began talking to him. Bolivar never has anything to do.

" 'She is a nice girl, the daughter of the Belgian commercial *attaché,*' began little Bolivar.

" 'Yes,' agreed our young ass Kornoff, who was half asleep on a sofa. 'She is very nice.'

" 'Why do you not marry her?' suggested the Chilian.

" 'Marry her?' echoed Kornoff, who was falling asleep again; 'but I have not thought of it.'

" 'I will arrange it,' cried Bolivar, jumping to his feet.

" 'Oh, you are very clever,' replied Kornoff dreamily.

"'We shall see,' argued the Chilian.

"Kornoff thought nothing more about the matter until a few days later, when little Bolivar appeared once more. He was quite excited.

"'I have great news,' he cried; 'try and guess.'

"Kornoff jumped up.

"'Is it war perhaps?' he asked gravely.

"The Chilian laughed loudly.

"'War!' he exclaimed; *'qu'est-ce que vons me chantez-là?* No, it is far better than that! I congratulate you with all my heart, my dear fellow.'

"He came forward and put out his hand.

"Kornoff shook hands willingly enough, since that cost nothing, and then inquired whether perhaps he had been made an Ambassador somewhere.

"'Ambassador!' laughed the Chilian. 'No, it is I who have been the ambassador! Lucky fellow, you are accepted—you are accepted.'

"Kornoff began to get alarmed.

"'What do you mean?' he inquired nervously.

"'That you are duly engaged—you are *fiancé*—I have arranged everything.'

"'To whom?'

"'To the daughter of the Belgian commercial *attaché,* of course,' replied the Chilian, a little irritably now. 'She accepts you, my dear fellow, she accepts you. Will you finally understand?'

"Kornoff, when he finally understood, flew into a towering rage. Think of it, he was *fiancé malgré lui!* The Chilian protested that it would be a question of a duel if he went back on him; and so, to make a long story short, as he did not want to fight a duel in addition to being engaged, our young Russian friend finally gave way, put on his frock coat, and paid a visit of ceremony in company with the Chilian *chargé.* He accepted the situation. As far as I remember, that is all there is of act one."

De Boyar shot a glance round the circle and gaily pro-

ceeded. Mrs. Jackson was looking more sour than ever. He was satisfied.

"The next thing that happens is that Kornoff suddenly receives a telegram from his old mother in Russia, saying that she is very sick. He obtains leave from the Minister to return home at once. There is general commiseration. Poor fellow—just engaged and yet to have to go away! Quite sad—is it not? But before departing he decides that he must give a dinner to his bachelor friends to celebrate the end of his salad days. That idea of the dinner was rather clever. Everybody who heard of it said, 'Kornoff, who is engaged and going to see his sick mother, is giving a dinner.' Forty of us went, and on the menus what do you think we found? In honour of the occasion there was printed first the Russian flag on one side, then the Chilian flag on the other side—to represent the happy mediation—and in the middle the Chinese flag! Of the Belgian flag—the flag of the betrothed—there was no trace. It was wonderful!

"The next morning at daybreak Kornoff leaves for Russia. After he had been away a month and no news came, his *fiancée's* family began to get anxious. What disaster has happened to him? Another month went by. There being no answers to letters, they begin telegraphing. Still no answers. They consult all their friends in search of comfort. Finally somebody had an idea: they send a last telegram with the answer *prepaid!* This at least is successful. Kornoff replies briefly that his old mother still being very sick, he will meet his *fiancée* in three months' time in Brussels. He cannot return so far away from his sick mother."

De Boyar stopped for a moment and began laughing spasmodically. His gravity deserted him at the critical moment. Everybody was convulsed. His absurd way of talking was inimitable.

"But let me tell you the end," he at last managed to gasp. "Kornoff is an *orphan* and has already applied for transfer

to South America! We have just heard it from Petersburg. Is it not killing?"

Baroness Waffen was the first to recover herself.

"It is too cruel," she said, holding her hand against her side and looking at Mrs. Jackson. "I hope none of those Belgians come to-day. I shall laugh in their faces."

"What could the poor man do?" expostulated De Boyar. "He did not wish to be engaged, so since a friend had made the way in for him, he himself had to make the way out. That is what he will say!"

"But," said the square-looking American secretary, "looking at it seriously, that girl's too young. She can't be more than sixteen and she looks about fourteen."

There were some protesting murmurs—several knew her exact age. She was much older than she looked.

"That's nothing," interposed Mrs. Hopeful. "*My* mother was married at five."

"At five!" exclaimed every one incredulously. "You must be a Hindoo!"

"No," explained Mrs. Hopeful, smiling gleefully. "I do not, of course, know it for a fact, but I know it by simple arithmetic. She was only thirty when I was twenty-four—at least that was what I always heard. Now, twenty-four from thirty—with the necessary allowance."

"How naughty of you!" protested Baroness Waffen, looking over the verandah. She was trying to see down the avenue. People never came until very late here; but when they began to arrive they always seemed to pour in all together. This quiet would soon be disturbed and their present *sans-gêne* would give place to dull solemnity.

De Boyar had begun whispering something to the American secretary which was evidently only intended for manly ears, so the four women on the verandah drew together.

"How are you getting on at that awful little hotel?" inquired Mrs. Jackson. Mrs. Jackson was not only rather severe-looking but was to-day in a bad temper. So Baroness

Waffen tried to catch the eye of the little Englishwoman before it was too late, but unfortunately she failed.

Mrs. Hopeful had merely shrugged her shoulders as an opening.

"It is rather more interesting just now than it was at first," she commented; "we are getting to know one another. For instance, we had quite a funny little dinner a night or two ago."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Jackson. The question-mark in her voice imperatively demanded further details.

"Well," explained Mrs. Hopeful, " we are all concessionnaires more or less, and we are trying to stop being suspicious of one another. Now that the battleship and arms-men have left, there is not such a warlike feeling in the air."

"There is, for instance, that awful Mr. Lorenzo, whom I know," remarked Mrs. Jackson.

Mrs. Hopeful smiled sweetly. The catting was commencing. She was glad her Jack was far away.

"He was with us that evening I just spoke of. He is not really so awful," she reflected aloud. "He is at least original and very amusing when he wants to be."

"A man who uses such qualities of scent," commented Mrs. Jackson severely. She would have liked to have said something further.

"Perhaps he does that to keep away our awful Peking smells," suggested Baroness Waffen amiably. "Even a man needs scent here."

The Baroness had heard Mrs. Jackson on the subject of Lorenzo before, and frankly it bored her. It was said that Lorenzo, in an attempt to make himself agreeable, had one day, after the Italian manner, suddenly assured Mrs. Jackson that she was beautiful—a statement which was so startlingly impossible that she had treated it as an impertinence.

"Well," continued Mrs. Hopeful, hoping to get on safer ground, "there is a Mr. Kerr who is rather nice. And then

there are several other agreeable men, and a very attractive woman, Madame Boisragon."

"Who is this Mr. Kerr?" inquired Mrs. Jackson, mentally reserving Madame Boisragon for the next onslaught.

Mrs. Hopeful laughed. This form of conversation always amused her.

"Really, I don't know much about him, excepting that he is quite easy to talk to," she replied. "He has also apparently a marvellous credit at the bank—so Jack says."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Jackson in a most peculiar tone, suddenly frowning. Mrs. Hopeful coloured pink. The last words had slipped from her quite inadvertently. She could have killed Mrs. Jackson. There ensued one of those silences which are more eloquent than words. Even De Boyar shifted his feet several times.

"I have not yet met that Madame Boisragon," said Baroness Waffen, coming to the rescue. The other women stood in such fear and trembling of Mrs. Jackson that now they dared not speak. "Why doesn't she call?"

"Perhaps she will come to-day," replied Mrs. Hopeful, recovering herself quickly. "I admire her so much, and I would really like you to know her."

Mrs. Reid, a pretty little woman who hardly ever said two words, was just about to make some remark, when Mrs. Jackson took the words out of her mouth.

"Has Madame Boisragon a husband?" she inquired with marked emphasis.

Mrs. Hopeful had now entirely recovered herself. Indeed, she now showed such marvellous control of her features that whilst her big, strange eyes were glittering angrily, the rest of her face was quite pleasant.

"A husband?" she echoed. "Oh, dear me, yes—quite like all of us—that is, occasionally."

Baroness Waffen hid a smile in her tea-cup. This little woman, after all, could protect herself: she would leave her to fight it out alone.

"Occasionally," repeated Mrs. Jackson, as if in doubt. Mrs. Hopeful stiffened and suddenly leaned forward. She had caught her.

"Well, you see," she said sweetly, "husbands are such wilful things, are they not? They come, they go—and sometimes they even forget us completely. How much poor wives are to be pitied—*sometimes* Mrs. Jackson."

Fortunately De Boyar, catching Baroness Waffen's eye, suddenly jumped up with theatrical effect. They were afraid that Mrs. Hopeful would show herself a little terror.

"The invasion is about to commence," he cried, addressing them all. "The quiet and peace and happiness are all over. Here comes the beginning of the crowd."

He pointed out over the verandah. Two or three carts had arrived, as well as a Hongkong mountain-chair and several people on foot.

Mrs. Jackson, crimson with rage, got up to say good-bye. Everybody knew that once she had been completely abandoned for two whole years by the estimable Mr. Jackson and that only *force majeure* had made him ever return. A most peculiar scar running down the back of her neck, people said, was the permanent record of his good-bye pat! As a matter of fact, Mrs. Jackson had really fallen through a window once and nearly cut her neck off, without the intervention of Mr. Jackson at all, but nobody wanted to believe that. She now swept off the verandah without paying the slightest attention to Mrs. Hopeful. There were sighs of relief.

"Cat!" exclaimed Mrs. Hopeful under her breath as she saw her back disappear.

"But it was beautiful," said De Boyar, coming forward at once and taking her by both hands excitedly. "It was lovely: it was perfect! Let me compliment you—let me tell you what I think! She needs that so often—about once every hour. I am sure she will tell the others about my Belgian story. But never mind, never mind. We are all revenged in advance—thanks to you, Mrs. Hopeful, thanks to you."

"Don't go yet, my dear," urged Baroness Waffen, who had got up. "Wait and see some other people." She was delighted that Mrs. Jackson had been taught that other people have claws as well. Smilingly she forced Mrs. Hopeful to sit down once more.

The stream of people began coming in. No sooner had the first batch arrived than others followed as if by some prearranged signal. The verandah and drawing-rooms resounded soon with a veritable babel of languages, but with French, the fast dying tongue of diplomacy, and English, the new *lingua franca* of the whole world, plainly fighting for final mastery. Baroness Waffen, busy shaking hands and getting things for people to eat and drink, still found time to gossip.

"Sometimes I think," she murmured to Mrs. Hopeful, who stayed by her, "that people starve themselves here until tea-time in order to have big appetites. Some of them *must* be mean! Watch me with this young man."

She crossed over to where a rather ugly old young man was talking bad French to an elderly lady who was gingerly sipping a cup of tea as if it might conceal surprises which would upset her. The old young man was watching this delicate performance with envious eyes.

"Mr. Trump," said Baroness Waffen to him, "won't you have anything—a cup of tea or a piece of cake?"

Mr. Trump almost jumped in his anxiety.

"Thank you, thank you," he said earnestly, "that would be very, very nice." He followed the Baroness to the tea-table with alacrity. She cut him an enormous piece of cake, which she put on a plate as if he were a schoolboy. With this and a cup of tea in his hands, he beat a prompt retreat; and sitting down in a corner began to satisfy himself with bulging eyes.

"Is he not killing?" remarked the Baroness presently. "Sometimes he takes seven cups of tea and simply piles of sandwiches. One wonders where it all goes to."

She was interrupted by three young girls coming bashfully forward in a line.

"Good-afternoon," said the eldest in a squeaky voice. "Mamma is so sorry that she could not come, but she has a bad headache and asks you to excuse her."

Baroness Waffen smiled and murmured her regrets.

The second girl, having disengaged herself from a young man, followed her sister.

"How do you do, Baroness," she said in a more squeaky voice. "Mamma is so sorry that she could not come, but she has a bad headache and asks you to excuse her."

Baroness Waffen's smile had become a little enigmatical. The irrepressible De Boyar having approached was plainly listening to it all with an expression of intense delight. He anticipated the advance of the third girl, who was rather small, by a sudden movement.

"But your mother—where is your mother," he said in mock concern, *"ou est maman?"*

The little girl, not to be foiled, merely sniggered at him and shook hands first with the Baroness.

"Good-afternoon, madame," she said in a very squeaky voice. "Mamma is so sorry that she could not come, but she has a bad headache and asks you to excuse her."

The Baroness Waffen made a valiant effort and succeeded in keeping a straight face. De Boyar hardly waited until the little girl was out of earshot before he began.

"What a pity—what a pity there are only three! Think of the dramatic possibilities if there were only more—say thirteen—thirteen all stretched in a long *queue* one behind the other eternally saying the same thing! It would be a sublime spectacle—a splendid proof of the constancy existing among people of the same flesh and blood! I should hire them all—become an *impresario* instead of a diplomat, and conduct them over the civilized world to delight dense audiences. Think of the originality—'Mamma is sick, mamma has a headache—mamma is this—mamma is that!' "

"Taisez-vous," said Baroness Waffen, shaking with laughter

and tapping him on the shoulder, "I cannot listen to your foolishness all day. You are truly an idiot—go away. Here come some more."

De Boyar discreetly vanished as he saw his Minister approach talking to a Mrs. Springham. Mrs. Springham, who was newly wed, came from Sioux City, Iowa, and was already voted a cure for the despondent. She had burst into this staid little world with an historic if venturesome remark. Seeing six children sitting all in a row in somebody's garden, she had inquired if they all had the same mother. On learning that this was actually so, she had exclaimed in mock terror, "Gee, then this is no climate for me!" Perhaps it was the rhythm which made the remark so unforgettable.

Fortunately Mrs. Springham had much energy and was a good fighter—qualities which have become more than excellent in the modern world. Now she began an animated conversation with Baroness Waffen. Two or three other Americans, attracted by the sound of her voice, at once came up, and soon they were making such a noise that everybody near them stopped talking.

"Why didn't you come, Baroness?" said Mrs. Springham, referring to a little concert which had just been given. Then, without waiting for an answer, she went on:

"It was just the richest thing in the town, I am sure. You know the little stage they always put up? Well, those two skittish young persons went on it, and Madame Gillatti, the hostess, after a pause followed them and sat down heavily—very heavily—in an armchair behind them. We all thought, of course, she did that just to give them confidence, and thought it rather nice of her. But about halfway through their song she got up slowly and majestically, and before you could say Jack Robinson, there she was booming in a deep, chesty voice, *L'amour, l'amour,* and some other words I don't know. It so took me by surprise that I just madly laughed" (Mrs. Springham pronounced it laffed). "You see it was really a trio, and we all thought it was a

duet! As soon as Madame Gillatti had got through with her *l'amour, l'amour,* she sat down comfortably with a big flop in her armchair again as if nothing had happened. But she fairly glared at me all the evening when she heard about me. I admit I was a bit scared, for she *is* heavy. Still, it was so, so funny! And then after the concert they just gave beer and sandwiches like on the German mail. You know we came out from Paris via Suez. I thought that beat everything for an official entertainment—I mean the beer and ham sandwiches."

Baroness Waffen passed her fingers through a string of jade Mrs. Springham was wearing.

"What pretty jade," she said.

"Do you like it?" answered Mrs. Springham eagerly. "Tom says I am so foolish because I am just buying up everything I can in this old town. There is a good deal to buy, too, I find; but I am fairly curio-mad, so I must keep on."

She went on entertaining them all and sending them into fits of laughter with her spontaneous sallies.

The chorus of voices, whispering, laughing, arguing in such a medley of tongues, became suddenly stilled. People turned round in surprise: they said they could hardly believe their eyes. Baroness Waffen's attention was at once attracted. She got up hastily from the chair in which she had just seated herself.

"It is old Sir Joshua, my dear," she said to Mrs. Hopeful, whom she had beckoned over to her. "You *must* meet him: he is our one Peking personality, and generally never goes outside his own garden."

She led the way towards Sir Joshua, who, pausing to exchange greetings with those around him, was searching a little confusedly for his hostess with his keen old eyes.

"It is too good of you to come, Sir Joshua," said Baroness Waffen, coming up to him. "I do not deserve it in the least."

"Oh, Baroness," protested Sir Joshua, shaking hands with Mrs. Hopeful and smiling kindly at the little woman, "what have I done that you should cover me with confusion?"

In his shyness he coloured at his own words and looked nervously about him. Sir Joshua was very slight and frail-looking; he looked, indeed, as if a gust of wind would blow him away. Yet though his hair was so white and his step had become wooden, from his eyes shone a peculiarly bright light, as if there was within him that which triumphed over his many physical weaknesses. Somehow he was very different from the people around him.

After he had exchanged a few commonplaces with Mrs. Hopeful, Baroness Waffen led him to a comfortable chair and made him sit down.

"I have taken charge of you, Sir Joshua," she said confidentially, plunging at once *in medias res,* "for a very special reason. I am nervous, and want to know what you really think of things political. What is going to happen here? I want you to talk really seriously to me."

A sad smile passed over Sir Joshua's face, and his expression entirely changed as she concluded. There appeared in place of the old gentleman seeking only to please his hostess, the real Sir Joshua weighed down by work and much thinking—and somewhat fearful of the future.

"What is going to happen?" he repeated mechanically, looking far away into the distance and losing all his nervousness. "Ah, if we could only know! The lines of fate are crossing and recrossing in a puzzling tangle, and no man dares say what may or may not come. Sometimes the lines form a perfect web—a Chinese puzzle: sometimes they appear as only vague tracings without real meaning."

He paused and smiled gently. He loved to talk in metaphors or in parables.

"But your opinion, Sir Joshua—what is your opinion?" insisted Baroness Waffen. "It is because I value it so much

that I ask you. I do not want a diplomatic answer—I want the truth. Please!"

She looked at him so appealingly that Sir Joshua inclined his head slightly in token of consent.

"I think," he said slowly, speaking so hesitatingly that there was nothing sententious in his manner, "that no one realizes the mighty forces lying latent in this great empire. This lack of understanding is the great danger. We up here in Peking think of China as the possession of the Manchus—a small race of conquerors resembling the Germanic tribe of Franks, who invaded Gaul and made the country so much their own that it now bears their name. But the Franks had more than a thousand years to assimilate themselves to the natives of Gaul—and to make them acknowledge their rule. The Manchus only came to their own two and a half centuries ago, and still form a separate clan—a separate people entrenched in and around Peking. In the last sixty years these Manchus have been humbled again and again by us—by Europe—and now they realize that their cup is full. People have never realized how bitter all the wars since the Canton days have been to them. Even this nation has hardly known of these things—though the Manchus have understood. Yet when the nation realizes that it is really one homogeneous whole, as the French people instinctively did at the end of the eighteenth century—that Manchu conquerors and conquered Chinese are only historic terms, and that the outer peril, the foreigner, is the great peril—then we may see what no one can imagine."

"You mean?" said Baroness Waffen intently. She was glad that no one was listening to them.

"I mean," replied Sir Joshua in a low voice, "that in time there will be millions of men in serried ranks and war's panoply at the call of the Chinese government—of the Manchus—there cannot be the slightest doubt of that! And if the Chinese government continues to exist, it will encourage, and will be quite right to encourage, uphold, and develop this national movement: it bodes no good for the rest

of the world, but China will be acting within her right and will carry through the national programme which is slowly but surely being mapped out. I mean that these Palace intrigues and various movements now going on have only an inner meaning and no outward meaning—and that we should not deceive ourselves. Things must march on to their natural end, and all the pin-pricking and slicing of this year of 1898 can only bring one reward."

"Oh," said Baroness Waffen, leaning back and fanning herself rapidly, "the very words I have used again and again to my husband. And yet he only laughs and says that when the time comes our government will know how to deal with such developments."

Sir Joshua did not answer. He appeared to be studying the laughing crowd. Perhaps he was a little sorry that he had said so much.

"But suppose the Manchus are beaten again," continued the Baroness, anxious to learn everything she could, "do you think they will really retreat into Manchuria in a vast horde —men, women, and children, as some people think—that they will run away this time? Think of all those pretty painted women, in their gorgeous silks and satins and fantastic head-dresses, being lost in a desert!"

Sir Joshua smiled.

"The era of great migrations is long passed," he said. "No disasters can possibly make it return. The only retreat for these people will be down wells and into rivers! It is terrible to think of what may happen."

"But why cannot we stop all this?" cried Baroness Waffen, shuddering.

"Ask your husband," said Sir Joshua, looking at her in a peculiar way. "We are being forced along a precipitous path."

"Baroness, Baroness," cried a young lady, rushing up excitedly, "you cannot stay there any longer. We want your opinion. It is about the Empress Dowager. Haven't Secretaries' wives a right to be presented just as much as Ministers' wives? Isn't it a shame that they are trying to exclude

us? They say it is a new rule. I do *so* want to see the Empress Dowager. Come, give us your opinion quickly."

The young lady made Baroness Waffen, who was very good-natured, get up. Sir Joshua rose as well.

"What I have said is only for you, Baroness," he whispered quickly.

"Of course, of course, dear Sir Joshua. A diplomat's wife understands that much," she replied as she hurried off.

Mrs. Hopeful was disappointed. Madame Boisragon did not come as she had hoped, and as everybody was now going she also made her farewells, in spite of Baroness Waffen's entreaties to stay. Men who had been riding or playing tennis were now waiting outside on the verandahs for their cold drinks, and the Baroness wanted Mrs. Hopeful's help to entertain them. But the little woman was resolute this time: she simply must go, she said.

Outside she found her old carter curled up in the cart fast asleep. She had been so long!

"Wake up, old man," she said, poking him merrily with her parasol. "Wake up, wake up. At length the great ordeal is over."

The carter arose with a start and climbed down.

"*Lao-la, lao-la*—I am old," he said apologetically, taking up the reins and coughing slowly. "I am old—very old."

When they reached the hotel Mr. Smith was at the entrance waiting for her. Mrs. Hopeful was pleasantly disappointed. He was not at all bad-tempered. He had had a long and interesting talk, he said, with Lorenzo, who had just left for up-country and would be away for some days. Madame Boisragon had gone out with Kerr, he added, some time ago.

"Oh!" commented Mrs. Hopeful monosyllabically.

Behind her parasol she made a little grimace and gave a peculiar little muffled whistle—things which were not good for Mr. Smith to perceive.

For Mrs. Hopeful was wondering—oh, yes, she was wondering a good deal about his second remark.

CHAPTER XX

"Tout le monde se plaint de sa mémoire, et personne ne se plaint de son jugement."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

WHEN Lorenzo and Peter Kerr met again a few days later, both men were instinctively conscious that in the interval their relationship to each other had grievously suffered. By some subtle process they had sheered off from each other, had somehow become less intimate. Kerr was undoubtedly ill at ease; and Lorenzo, examining the man with the eye of the expert, said to himself in his expressive Italian way, "The devil! This woman has him tight by the hair!"

Lorenzo was also manifestly annoyed to find that Kerr had done next to nothing in his absence; he had apparently occupied himself in waiting for his return, and had not found that process half as wearisome as he would have in the past. The one thing he had unquestionably done, Lorenzo discovered after some questioning, was to reply to unexpected correspondence with his own Legation. The Italian on reading these letters was instantly convinced that it would have been far better in this case if Kerr had done nothing. It was immediately evident to Lorenzo that Kerr's English competitors had somehow got wind of the steps he had already taken in conjunction with him, and being probably alarmed at the idea that he—Lorenzo—had been enlisted to work against them, they were now bringing pressure to bear very cleverly so as to discourage Kerr from making further independent efforts of this nature. Thus the Minister had stated in one letter that, being duly instructed to that effect from London, it would be impossible for him now to support in any way projects of which the details were not fully communicated to him in advance; and that further, seeing

that only harm could come from rival schemes being laid before the Chinese government by competing British syndicates, it would be incumbent on him, as Her Majesty's representative, should the occasion for so doing arise, to point out clearly to the Peking authorities that Mr. Kerr's projects were purely private and in no way supported by Downing Street. Lorenzo was immensely annoyed at the turn Kerr's affairs had taken; and for once he made no attempt to conceal his irritation.

"You should have formally acknowledged receipt of these letters and said not one word more," he concluded after a lot of talk, frowning and fidgeting with his hands. "The very wording is the same used every month of the year. I have had trouble in the same way myself, and I have protected myself only by treating such correspondence as an intrusion on my private affairs. The whole stand taken by European officialdom in China is ridiculous and must lead to trouble. What right have they to meddle? We are not children!"

His own business being so nearly concluded, he felt particularly annoyed at Kerr's lack of confidence in his methods. He was certain that it was bad on principle to show a single card in such a complex game as was now proceeding; and here was his friend and ally apparently willing to discuss his whole hand with the first-comer because he was an official! He began lecturing him again: there was no end to the things Lorenzo said.

Still, with all this, when Kerr had heard him through he merely shrugged his shoulders and lazily lighted a cigarette. Then the blood rushed to Lorenzo's face, and he suddenly shifted his view of the whole situation. Very good, this fellow was contented: he was amusing himself: he had fallen into the comfortable frame of mind of believing that fortune might be wooed and won like a woman. He would show him the contrary—by degrees.

For a moment Lorenzo, so incensed was he, was inclined to blurt out something indiscreet. His Italian caution, how-

ever, soon got the better of him; so, instead of speaking any more just then, he closed his lips tight together after his peculiar mannerism and steadily studied the floor.

He decided in a very few seconds how he would act. He could not afford the risk of a rupture, since Kerr's bank-account was at his disposal. Also, he had a sort of professional pride which forbade such stupid tactics, since a concessionnaire is the man of all men who must know how to meet every possible situation, who must be a master—improviser—in fact, an *improvisatore,* composing and reciting verses without preparation.

So suddenly Lorenzo smiled. Then he looked up as if an engaging idea had struck him.

"It will be rather funny," he said easily, "if in the end this develops into a three-cornered or even a four-cornered fight. If it does, we might easily arrange a compromise."

As if to give point to his thought, he began lazily arranging three or four matches round a match-box on the small table which separated him from his companion, shifting the matches this way and that and finally breaking them into pieces.

"What do you mean?" inquired Peter Kerr, coming discontentedly back to the point and groaning inwardly at his companion's unwearying persistence. He wondered how it was that he never got tired of the same eternal subject.

"I mean," said Lorenzo very deliberately, as if he were thinking aloud, "that very possibly you may soon see your way to giving up a portion of your scheme to the French and Belgians, and then in combination with them I am absolutely certain that we could defeat all comers. If you thought such a thing possible, I might save time and trouble by beginning now to see how it would work out. For instance, all these lines north of the Yang-tse River have been roughly surveyed—you have your first figures—you might do worse than join forces, you know. It is quite possible that it could be arranged. I see a way."

Kerr sat up suddenly, as Lorenzo stopped. Then, for some

reason, he took off his straw hat. They were sitting in the hotel hall with lemon squashes in tall tumblers beside them; and apart from the usual drowsing servants on the corridor benches there appeared not a soul within sight or hearing.

"Do you realize," said Kerr, grasping the crown of his straw hat between his hands and looking squarely at the Italian, "do you realize what this scheme means to me? Have I not told you again and again that it has long been my great idea, and that to throw up the sponge in the way you suggest is absolutely impossible?"

"I realize it and yet I do not realize it," answered the Italian cryptically. He toyed with his black beard with a peculiar studied indifference which was very insolent.

"What do you mean?"

Peter Kerr, being physically somewhat tired, was mentally irritated. It would require very little to make him openly angry.

Lorenzo looked at him very calmly and showed no trace of embarrassment. Lorenzo was not an athletic figure—as a matter of fact he was distinctly fat—but he was a singularly brave man in his own peculiar way, and he cared as little for the consequences of his speeches as he did for the legions of summer flies now climbing up and down the hotel walls. Also he was very deliberate. So now he picked his words as he spoke.

"I will explain. What I mean is not hard to understand. You say that this scheme of yours—which to my non-technical eyes is really admirable—is your great idea. You also say that under no circumstances will you modify it so long as you are not openly beaten. All this I realize as being undoubtedly so—originally, mark my words, originally. Just now, however, I am unable to realize that you"—he paused and sought for the word—"adhere, that is the word—that you adhere completely to your original scheme. You do not show the vigour and singleness of purpose which I have

explained are all necessary in Peking for success—diplomatic success. Perhaps I am not very plain; but that is because I am not speaking in my own language."

"Oh," ejaculated Peter Kerr a little irrelevantly at the end of this long speech, in a tone of singular relief, "oh, well, perhaps I have been rather slack. Perhaps you are right."

The Italian raised his long glass to his mouth so as to hide a smile. Of course the other had thought that he would make some blunt reference: that would have doubtless been the English way. Lorenzo took a wholly unnecessary time to swallow the little he drank, and when he set down his tumbler he had decided that for the moment he had gone far enough.

He got up and looked at his watch.

"Then it is agreed that in any case no more replies are sent to the Legation?" he said lightly. "Meanwhile, I will take up the threads where I left them and try to discover what has actually happened. *Au revoir.*"

They parted almost cheerfully. Yet, as Lorenzo knew would be the case, Kerr went away with a frown on his face and self-anger in his heart. Within a very few days the Italian believed he would win his point by introducing certain new complications into the game. Yet even his fertile brain could not have invented the strange revenges which were even then being prepared by the whirligig of time. But in any case he made up his mind that he had done his duty.

Carnot, coming out of his office a few minutes after this, stopped suddenly in front of two hall-boys who were laughing and whispering to each other.

"What is it?" he inquired gruffly, in a way which always made his servants tell the approximate truth.

The two men looked at each other and then one said in the vernacular:

"Whilst the Italian and the Englishman were talking here just now, No. 6 was in the room here."

The servant pointed to the open door of the little private dining-room. A screen inside the door would hide any one from view.

"Well?" said Carnot.

The boy resumed:

"When the Italian and the Englishman had finished, No. 6 put his head out to see whether they had gone and then suddenly rushed out."

"Salop," commented Carnot reflectively, walking on.

He did not like No. 6 at all. He was a new arrival—a young Belgian mixed up with Boisragon's syndicate, he was sure, for he had overheard him talking confidentially with Madame Boisragon.

Carnot wondered whether he should tell Lorenzo about the incident. Then he decided not to do so; it would lead to nothing and might make trouble.

By such trifles are great things decided.

CHAPTER XXI

"La durée de nos passions ne dépend pas plus de nous que la durée de notre vie."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

IT seemed to Peter Kerr, on the very evening of the day on which he had this serious talk with Lorenzo, that Madame Boisragon was more reserved towards him. He could not understand the reason why. Several times he asked her what was the matter, and each time she gave a different answer.

"My dear man," she said finally, "you are too exacting. What can it matter to you if I feel thoughtful?"

"It is true I may not be able to cure it," he replied smilingly, "but perhaps I can relieve it."

To this she merely shrugged her shoulders. All that evening she remained in the same curious frame of mind, and there was now somehow born in him the unenviable feeling that he had rushed in where angels fear to tread. . . .

Two days later there was something else—a letter from England.

The letter came as fateful letters always come, carried unconcernedly by an unfeeling hand, when the contents may be a bombshell blowing up a Fool's Paradise and bringing one face down on Mother Earth—or a lodestar, guiding one's footsteps back to forgotten regions. Some one has already written on the strange modern miracle of the postal pillar-box which permits a person at one end of the world unerringly to find the person at the other end whether he desires it or not, by the simple act of dropping a letter through a slit. It is really rather wonderful that Fate should have such a cunning way of serving writs.

Peter Kerr took this particular envelope and examined it as

carefully as the illiterate do when the postman brings them news. Almost suspiciously he balanced it in his hand. He noted the postmarks carefully, and calculated the time it had taken to travel from London to Peking—forty-four days—and then finally turned his attention to the handwriting. It was, of course, a woman's handwriting, yet for some reason he did not recognize it at once. The tall, defiant lettering somehow attracted him; and for a few fleeting seconds he idly wondered whether handwriting was really any clue to character.

He tore open the envelope and began to read. The expression on his face was soon not unlike that of a man who has surrendered himself to his dentist. Yet the letter was curiously terse, curiously impersonal, curiously restrained. It was nothing to make a man gloomy. It read:

DEAR MR. KERR: It seems years since I received your brief farewell note in London, and I have felt that before now I should have perhaps sent you a line in reply.

How is the world, I wonder, treating you in the mysterious Beyond where your business has called you? My ideas not only of geography but of strange peoples are admirably vague, and China is to me the land of tea-chests and pig-tailed people, and nothing else. Sir James Barker says that you are still living in Peking, and from this—as I *do* know the capital of the country—I suppose your great scheme still demands your unremitting attention.

I have tried to picture to myself what the country is like, but I have only come across one book which attempts to describe it, and that has left me more fogged than ever. It is a book by a woman who gives the names of the people who helped her on her road, and who, though she is careful to mention the exact hour she starts every day, and how she feels getting up so early, forgets to mention much else! Why are there so many idiots in the world?

I suppose in Peking you are living practically *à la chinoise,* and that there is hardly a soul to speak to. It must be dull for you. I have learnt that it is a remarkably dirty city but interestingly barbaric.

I can think of no scrap of news from here of any particular interest to you. We are doing approximately the same as we always

do—and things are by no means exciting. Mrs. John West has given several very successful parties lately, and they say that John West has made another pile in South Africans, which enables them to spend money like water. A month ago, being rather tired of the same eternal round, mother and I flitted across to the Continent and had two weeks in Spain. The Alhambra and Seville are simply lovely, but oh, the hotels! It seems silly to tell you anything in detail, as by the time my letter reaches you you may be on your way home or have disappeared somewhere else. Besides, I am quite sure that, like most people of to-day, I can talk much better than I can write.

If I can do anything for you, let me know. I have acres of time but nothing to cultivate, and so the tares of laziness are growing up apace. Does that sound subtle or silly?

Good-bye.

Yours very sincerely,

PHYLLIS MAY.

P.S.—We may go to Canada in the summer, and I should dearly love to go right around the world—or at least to Japan. How far is Japan from China?

That was all.

Peter Kerr read the letter three times before he laid it down. Then, as he was replacing it in its envelope, he changed his mind and looked at it again, only to lean back in his chair with a very curious look on his face.

"Confound everything!" he said a little irrelevantly at last, starting irritably to his feet and crushing his correspondence carelessly into his pockets.

People were always saying the world was very small: he imagined that he was living millions of miles away from everything; and here was the chance—— He broke off his thoughts, only to begin again.

Still, there was nothing in the letter. He wondered why women always wrote like that, saying so much by what they left unsaid.

It was a horrid trait: it was a little cruel, and certainly unkind.

Damn!

He gazed moodily through the green bamboo blinds at the

street below, watching the heavy wheeled traffic rattling along in its customary manner. He wished vaguely that something might happen to take him out of his reverie.

Something did happen—the wrong thing, of course. Madame Boisragon, who was at the other end of the verandah, had heard the little commotion he had made, and came forward from where she had been tending some flowers.

"Did you speak?" she inquired, scrutinizing his face, yet remaining where an imaginary line divided his half of the verandah from hers.

"I only muttered something," he replied with sudden gruffness. "It was nothing but the usual irritating letters."

He turned round, and was suddenly conscious that she looked fresh and attractive in a white muslin dress, and that her paleness had an added charm in the deep shade.

Somehow it annoyed him very much. He wished just then that she had been ugly—very ugly.

"Letters!" exclaimed Madame Boisragon lightly, invading his territory, and continuing to look at him thoughtfully. "What do letters matter? If you could read my own correspondence!"

She made a little grimace, and then pretended to shudder.

He stood silent until she reached his chair, and then somehow their hands met.

"What a stupid man of moods you are to-day!" she teased. "Only two days ago you were complaining of me. Now I have my revenge. Sometimes your letters do not monopolize your attention so much. The other afternoon, for instance—— See, I will relieve you of them."

Before he had realized what she was doing she had thrust her hand into his coat-pocket and pulled out everything.

"There," she said, dropping the contents on the bamboo table. "There they have gone, big and small alike, and the worry has disappeared."

Had he only stayed still there would have been no *contre-temps*. But being only a man, he had not woman's matchless *sang-froid*. Therefore he thrust out his hand to recover

his threatened property, and in doing so, knocked to the ground the only letter which had been opened.

"That is curious," said Madame Boisragon, picking up and scrutinizing the others as he bent to the ground, "you have not even opened these; it is then only that one little letter which has caused all the trouble. Burn it and then it will be forgotten. Here are the matches."

She stretched out her hand to the box which was lying on the table. There was something curiously child-like in the suggestion; something which suddenly offended his English common sense. Inwardly he cursed the intimacy which made her so much mistress of his property; outwardly, in a last effort at saving the situation, he smiled, and then did, of course, another stupid thing.

"But I want to keep the letter," he objected, "for I must reply to it." He thought that sounded well.

But her quick French eyes had caught a glimpse of the handwriting as the envelope lay in his hand, and at once she understood.

"It is then from a woman," she said slowly, pulling her hand away from his. "Oh, yes," she continued, as he put the letter safely away, "it is undoubtedly from a woman."

Peter Kerr shrugged his shoulders. He had no intention of denying it.

"Who is she?" continued the lady, pretending to smile. An expression came on her face which Kerr had never seen before. Nobody understands anything yet about the jealousy of women, though it has been written on for a goodly number of centuries. But Kerr felt it—felt its immense strength—and became less calm.

"She is a girl in England who has written me an ordinary letter," he said, "which has somehow irritated me extraordinarily. There you have the whole story."

He wished that his manner could have been more natural. He saw in the deepening displeasure on her face that he had failed to be convincing.

"A girl in England," echoed Madame Boisragon; "and

why should a girl in England have the power to produce such effects?"

She laughed at her own question with that curious woman's laughter which rasps a man's nerves like the play of a file on iron.

"Excuse me," said Peter Kerr a little proudly, making up his mind but still striving to control himself, "this letter is after all my affair—I mean it is a purely personal matter——"

He did not say all he had to say, but his looks supplied the missing parts.

Madame Boisragon suddenly drew up her skirts and turned to go.

"Oh," she said in her cold way that he hated, "oh, is that so? I shall remember."

Slowly she walked away with studied effect, conscious that his eyes were on her—conscious that the man was observing every inch of her.

For it is when women turn their backs that their power ascends—that is, when passions have not yet burnt out.

CHAPTER XXII

"Quand on n'a pas ce que l'on aime, il faut aimer ce que l'on a."—CORNEILLE, *L'inconnu.*

IN the end, of course, he humbled himself; but there was an open breach between the two for one whole day. It has always been thus, and so doubtless will it be until the end of time.

The Chinese, who will be properly understood by the rest of the world in two or three hundred years, very cleverly discovered nearly forty centuries ago (more or less) the existence of what they call the dual principle—a principle which they maintain runs not only through life but through every affair. Just as there are light and darkness, so must there be always an active and a passive force, say these original thinkers. This is known to them as the principle of *Yin* and *Yang,* a mighty principle which is the beginning and end—the reason, the explanation, the justification, the I-know-not-what—of all things in this delightful world. The two forces, endlessly acting and reacting on each other, by such ceaseless reciprocity make all things possible. Arguing on these lines, the female force, being the passive one, has therefore only to wait long enough for the active force to assert itself in the way it inevitably must.

It is all very curious. Doubtless when the Chinese become scientific in a strictly modern way, arguing from these principles they will be able to codify a whole series of interesting deductions regarding the sexes, which although now generally surmised have not yet received proper scholarly recognition.

In passing it may also be observed that the inventors of China's peculiar ideographic and pictorial writing—these people of forty centuries ago—have preserved for all time

in their language their cynical analysis of the passive or female element—the manner in which, if left alone, it makes for evil rather than good—by making the sign (known as a radical character) for woman, which is pictorially represented, find a place in many compound characters in which a bad quality is represented. They begin in a fit way by ingeniously representing peace as nothing else than a woman underneath a roof (that is, a woman shut up indoors). They pass on to denote envy or malice as a woman peeping at a door. To be covetous is represented by a woman in a forest; a phantom is compounded by writing "woman" and "fair" together. To be proud is denoted by "woman" and "dry" written side by side; and so on to the end of the chapter in many dozens of ingenious combinations. They crown this unfeeling shame by making a group of three women—that is, the character woman written three times over—apply loosely to unchastity generally. How worthy of censure are these old-world cynics!

Perhaps it was necessary, being in the land of this analytical people, that the universal law should be obeyed. And so it came about that in this particular case of which we write the man was actively repentant and the woman passively contented.

Something had been lost, however, something which would never return; and Lorenzo, finding Peter Kerr taking an increasing interest in going out with him and interviewing various influential officials, began to believe that his tactics were already successful. Kerr had in any case totally lost his original aversion to canvassing far and wide in the irregular way which suited the East; and he showed that he proposed to avail himself of all possible allies. The Manchu Prince to whom they had confided the special patronage of the enterprise referred them endlessly to others, through secretaries and interpreters who came and went mysteriously in blue-hooded Peking carts. All these men seemed very anxious that no one should steal a march on them. If they

collided in the corridors of the little hotel with other emissaries, they had no hesitation in showing their distrust and hinting about the dangers of traitors. There was a universal desire among this lesser fry to appropriate all the pickings that were to be had, and the easiest way of accomplishing this was to attack competitors—that is, those who protested they could be of use, too. It was infinitely tantalizing though not very expensive work; for almost each day found a fresh batch of men to be dealt with.

One afternoon, when Kerr was tired with all this curious work and too lazy to ride, he went up on the Tartar Wall, and strode away to where the great rampart looks down on a picturesque tracing of canals and distant temple-grounds full of sombre green trees—a scene which in the golden light of the setting sun cannot be anywhere surpassed in the summer days. The challenge of rival colours, the vast distances, the miraculous clearness of the atmosphere, combined to make a matchless panorama under the dome of spotless blue and somewhat eased his heart.

Slowly walking along, he came at length to an outjutting buttress; and there, to his surprise, he found standing, quite motionless, little Mrs. Hopeful. She was drinking it all in with a strange expression of rapture illuminating her face.

"Is it not wonderful?" she whispered at length, pointing to where the canal, flowing immediately under the Tartar Wall, mysteriously entered a landscape full of green and yellow tiled roofs set amidst the stately groves of trees. "If one could only fix it for all time in verse." A note-book in her hand showed him what her occupation had been.

"I have got something very near it," she murmured, more to herself than any one else. "Perhaps it will do. If I could only be sure!"

She sighed and hid the note-book suddenly in her pocket.

"Well, what are you doing here alone, Mr. Kerr?" she suddenly recommenced in a matter-of-fact voice, as if she had only just noticed him. "Where are all your companions?"

He pointed with his stick in the direction of the Inner city behind them.

"Down there, I should imagine, playing tennis, or calling, or gossiping endlessly, or doing some other obvious things."

She looked at him, surprised at his tone of voice, which was almost bitter.

"Why should tennis or calling or gossiping be so obvious?" she inquired thoughtfully. "You imply thereby that there can be things which are not so easily defined."

Kerr allowed his features to relax a little; an argument always interested him and banished his uncomfortable thoughts.

"If I shout or jump about in broad daylight I am doing something that is quite obvious," he said. "If, on the other hand, I stand on my head in the middle of the night, it is not obvious—at least, relatively speaking."

Mrs. Hopeful looked at him, not certain whether he was serious or not.

"I believe you are talking absurdities," she replied. "Do you ever stand on your head in the middle of the night? If you had said you were walking alone on the Wall because the spirit moved you to do so, I might have confessed that that is exactly the reason why I am here. As it is, I feel strongly tempted to argue with you on the proper definition of a word."

"Why do you feel like being alone on the Wall?" asked Peter Kerr bluntly, avoiding further discussion.

"Shall I be frank?" she inquired. "Well, in any case, I am going to tell you. It was very simple. Jack was boring me to extinction."

"Really!" said Peter Kerr, beginning to smile, and realizing that it is better to be humorous than gloomy. "How unoriginal of Jack!"

"It was indeed," sighed the little woman, staring into space.

"You know," she continued, "we have a wonderful scheme, too—that is, Jack has—and my husband, who is down some-

where in the middle of China, is looking after the other end of it. Every now and again Jack gets a horrid fit of energy and says that business must come before pleasure. Isn't it stupid? This means that he sits moodily trying to work out calculations and getting irritated with other people's correspondence. Can you wonder that I am bored?"

"You are a martyr," said Kerr, somewhat solemnly.

She agreed with a pensive shake of her curly head.

"You are rails, aren't you?" she inquired without curiosity, looking at him doubtfully. "I mean railway concessions."

"Yes," confessed Peter Kerr, suddenly speaking in another tone and wondering how much she knew of his affairs. "I suppose I am."

Mrs. Hopeful hardly waited for his answer; she was full of her own ideas.

"We are water-power and improvement of rivers," she said. "Straightening them out, you know. It is an ideal business apparently. There is one river which Jack says might make his fortune, if he could get hold of it. But that is just the trouble. People are so slow at appreciating novel ideas. The other evening, at one of the Legations, everybody began talking concessions, and one man was chaffing Jack badly. Jack finally got wild and asked him whether he did not believe it was possible to straighten out this particular river.

" 'Yes,' said the other, 'certainly; I have the secret of the only method.'

" 'How?' inquired Jack, becoming all ears.

" 'Why,' said the other man, 'the only way to straighten it is to get hold of the tail and put a few million Chinese on the job and let them pull with a long jolly pull! And then, by Jove, it will come straight, but not before!'

"The man was a naval officer who had been on that wretched river for three years, so he knew what he was talking about. Jack has not recovered from that yet. I believe whenever he begins to work he thinks of it, and of course gets angry. Once upon a time I replied to an Amer-

ican advertisement calling attention to the perfect method of exterminating fleas. For my two dollars I got back a little box containing two wooden blocks, marked 'A' and 'B.' The instructions curtly said that having secured the flea, the only thing necessary was to place him on block 'A' and strike him smartly with block 'B.' There is nothing like learning!"

Peter Kerr laughed at the little woman, but very soon became serious again.

"Perhaps all of our schemes are moonshine," he said thoughtfully, taking out his cigarette-case; "we are all working in the dark in a rather most audacious manner."

Mrs. Hopeful lighted her cigarette before she spoke. The smoke seemed to give her inspiration.

"Shall I shut my eyes and tell you what I see?" she asked. "I can see things sometimes very well. It may help."

Peter Kerr nodded. She was so full of mysticism and magnetism that she impelled an unwilling respect. Without a word she now leaned her forehead against the grey brick parapet and clasped her hands in an attitude almost of prayer. Kerr watched her curiously and took care not to move.

"I see," she said at length, "Lorenzo successful—completely successful. I am quite sure of it. I see another man successful, too—oh, yes, he is successful. He is tall and dark, and has a great black beard covering his whole face, and he walks in a quick yet shambling way. I do not know in the least who this man is: I have never seen him. I see a third man who is also successful—yes, I think he is successful—a man who, who——" She broke off and muttered to herself in a quick undertone. Then suddenly, without warning, she pulled her head away from the brickwork and opened her eyes.

"Bother," she said in her natural voice, looking at Kerr reflectively, "I thought I had something else as well, but it escaped me. It slipped away quickly somewhere up into the

clouds, and though I tried to follow, I lost it. I wonder who it was. It crossed and followed the third man. However, I have got the third man all right. I am very sorry, but this man is neither you nor Jack. Oh, no! Do you know who he is? He is that odious little creature Boisragon."

The colour stole slowly into Kerr's cheeks, as a mixture of irritation and apprehension filled him. He would have liked to laugh, but something prevented him. Was this really to be the end?

Mrs. Hopeful looked at him almost wistfully, as he stood there leaning on his stick. There was something pathetic about her little figure. It was as if she possessed a spirit too large for her small frame—a spirit which would one day burst its cage.

"You seem to have a wonderful power," said Kerr at length. "For instance, the other evening with Mr. Smith."

"Don't," interrupted Mrs. Hopeful, the colour now leaping into her cheeks and her eyes sparkling. "Jack is furious about that! Still he says I disgraced him. *I* say that nobody even noticed it. But I can do it easily, can I not? I believe I could make him cut off his finger or swallow a bottle of vinegar. Oh, yes!"

Her eyes roamed over the vast landscape spread below them.

"It needs all sorts of people to make a world—does it not?" she continued pensively. "All sorts of people. There must be people who dance and people who sing; people who weep and people who laugh; fat people and thin people; tall people and short people; dark people and fair people; people who love and people who haven't got it in them to love at all."

She turned and regarded him in a sly way. Unfortunately for him he was looking out reflectively over the parapet. He seemed to invite a flank attack. Mrs. Hopeful could not resist it.

"Mr. Kerr," she said suddenly, "I should love to see you

two alone. You are both so different from me—so repressed, so careful, so cold, so distant. Oh, it is curious! Mr. Kerr, *do* tell me how you make love!"

Instead of laughing she laid an imploring hand on his sleeve. He turned with a start and shot a glance at her. She was so small and volatile and had such big, innocent eyes that it was in vain that he tried to be openly angry.

"Why," he said at length, changing colour, "why, Mrs. Hopeful——"

He stopped without concluding. She dropped her eyes in open disappointment.

"Of course," she went on, "I am only being absurd: you must not mind me—do not be angry. I would dearly like to know, and now I shall never know."

She resumed her study of the landscape, with a sigh which still further disarmed him. It was hard for him to talk much more; so soon, begging her permission to do so, he continued his walk alone.

When he came down at length off the mighty Wall, he was astonished to find that little encampments of square blue tents had sprung up like mushrooms under the Gates. Groups of picturesque but savage-looking soldiers were standing or lounging about near them, with their rifles stacked in neat little piles between the tents. Above flaunted parti-coloured banners, lending to the scene an additional air of romance; and lines of ponies tethered to stakes showed that many of the men were mounted. Under the shadow of the grim Tartar Wall, at times half obscured by the clouds of grey dust flung up by the ceaseless cart traffic, these soldiers seemed to sound a peculiar note of warning.

Kerr leaned on his stick and watched them for many minutes, welcoming the change it gave to his thoughts. When he walked away he noticed that a fist was shaken, and that several men spat on the ground.

He wondered what it meant.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Tous les événements sont enchainés dans le meilleur des mondes possibles."—VOLTAIRE, *Candide.*

THE month of August was drawing to a close and the fierce summer heat gradually abating. It is doubtless one of Nature's wise provisions that, in all those vast regions of the world where the winters are so long and so cruel, there should be no real spring but only summer. From ice and snow there comes a sudden and almost magical transition to heat which even when the nights are still cold is at midday quite tropical. All through May the sun is putting forth his very mightiest efforts to consume the cold which has so long imprisoned the soil, and thus to quicken to luxuriant life the struggling crops. This month is in northern climes almost the hottest of the year; for later, though the heat still lasts and the climate of necessity becomes more unhealthful, the burden of living is much relieved by the constant rains.

For no sooner has Nature been stimulated to do her best by this imperative action of the sun, than the soil has become so parched that to quench such unnatural thirst the rain-clouds slowly accumulate, and soon empty themselves of their moisture in torrential and soul-deadening downpours. That is the second summer phase. Towards the close of August, in the northern provinces of China, the shortening days allow cool evening breezes to fan the air and render life almost enjoyable at a time when the rest of the great empire is still gasping for breath both night and day. The worst is over in the sun-dried north. The battle has made up for what it has lacked in length by the vehemence with which the first onslaughts were delivered. Thus does the wonderful law of compensations always operate for the benefit of man.

This oppression of summer is generally not felt so much by those whose blood has not been thinned by long residence in such climates. And thus it happened that though the occupants of the little hotel, immersed in their various concerns, complained from time to time of the heat, it was not until the cooler evenings and the pleasant breezes eloquently informed them of the furnace they had been through, that they all wondered aloud how they had been able to stand what hardened residents proclaimed a doleful and distressing time.

Somebody proposed in the midst of these reflections that they should at least have a short holiday by riding to the Great Wall of China. Both Madame Boisragon and Mrs. Hopeful, each for a different reason, jumped at the idea—they would be delighted to have a brief change, they said. It wanted but three days to the fifteenth of the Chinese lunar month; so if they completed their preparations speedily, they would arrive at the top of the mountains on the night of the fifteenth day and see the wonderful edifice by the light of the full moon. Could it be arranged in time?

Fortunately there was Carnot. Carnot undertook to have everything arranged at once. Money being the golden key which unlocks all gates, it was merely a question of dollars to secure that a caravan of carts, duly supplied with all possible luxuries, should stand waiting on the dusty street outside the hotel for the start to be made. Carnot, like an old campaigner, always had everything in order in a few hours.

Of the little party at the hotel, only Lorenzo refused to go. He had no time for holidays, he said. He attempted to persuade Kerr that it was a bad moment to be absent even for a couple of days; but Kerr was resolute and said that he too needed a change. Besides, nothing very much could happen in seventy-two hours, which was the maximum time he proposed to be absent. So Lorenzo, who had been satisfied with his attention to business ever since the day he had talked to him so frankly, merely shrugged his shoulders and dropped

the subject. Tall Mr. Smith, and two or three other men, who said they should really not be absent for more than a few hours in those busy times, were also only too glad of an excuse to get away from the wall-bound city; and so it came about that they all managed to make up their minds late the same afternoon the proposal had been made.

By seven o'clock the next morning (though they should have started at five) they were actually off, the mob of ponies raising clouds of dust as they went down the street. They passed like some band of irregular cavalry (for to every person was attached the inevitable *mafu*) down mile after mile of the endless raised driving-roads within the limits of the Tartar city, for in imperial Peking there is ample room for an army of a million or two. Everybody was in a gay mood and anxious to push on. So they cantered, they trotted, they galloped, covering the ground very quickly and leaving behind them great wreaths and clouds of dust, which twisted and turned and finally dissolved themselves against the faces of indignant shopkeepers just beginning to wake up and stand in groups at their doors, drowsily discussing market affairs.

They were beginning to catch sight of the flanking city walls, when to their astonishment a rapid clanging of gongs and a growing rush of blue-clad people arrested their progress. Smoke had begun to rise in dense columns from some big buildings standing inside high compound walls, a few hundred yards away from where they were riding; and now, as if by magic, the general aspect of the street changed. Some strange word must have flown along; for of one accord, the masters of shops which had just been opened began rapidly putting up their solid wooden shutters once more, leaving only a narrow space open, out of which anxious faces peered.

"Shall we stop and see it?" asked Peter Kerr, trying to quiet his fuming pony. They had ridden nearly five miles without a pause and the ladies might need a rest, he thought.

A young *attaché,* who was one of their party and was talking volubly to his *mafu* in the vernacular, suddenly made a gesture of dissent.

"It is unwise, I think," he said, and some of the others promptly seconded him.

"No, no, let us stop. Let us stop," cried Mrs. Hopeful, impulsively overruling every one. The *attaché* now explained that his man had said it would be foolish to remain where they were, as the shops only closed in the peculiar manner they were now doing when it was secretly known that the city was disturbed. Kerr remembered then the stone that had been thrown at Lorenzo and had cut his face so many weeks ago; he remembered also the insolent man he had thrown down inside the Imperial city; and finally he remembered the little encampments of soldiery he had observed quite recently under the City Gates. Instantly he was sorry that he had not insisted on their riding on. The women might be in danger. The other men, however, seemed suddenly to become rather indifferent; they knew nothing of any menace, and in their present festive mood they would have perhaps laughed at his warnings. So the party began riding slowly down the street again, without any one knowing what they proposed to do.

The young *attaché* soon came alongside Peter Kerr.

"If they only knew all I knew," he grumbled, "they would not be so devilish keen to get mixed up in a Peking crowd."

Kerr looked at him inquiringly.

"Is there really anything in the stories floating around?"

The young man laughed and made an irritated gesture, spurring his pony, which was shying at the running people, at the same time.

"I don't know," he answered gloomily; "one day the chief wires home all sorts of things—the next day he contradicts them. Who can ever know in this country?"

Kerr suddenly quickened his pony into a hand-gallop and caught up with the leaders. He had made up his mind.

"Let us in any case get off the main road," he called to

Madame Boisragon, who was watching with wondering eyes the streams of people now pouring towards the burning building. He led the way down the steep embankment to the entrance of a broad lane, where at least it would be safer. Fortunately everybody followed him.

"Why did we come down here?" said Mrs. Hopeful petulantly, as soon as they had drawn rein and were trying to prevent their excited ponies from bumping and kicking one another. "We can't see half as well." She flashed her eyes in anger at Kerr.

There was, however, now no need for any answer. The crowds had grown so magically, as they had ridden the last few yards, that even where they were now halted they were soon quite surrounded, whilst on the main road the confusion became worse confounded. Every house, every side-street, every lane, as if some secret watchword had been passed, had sent its dozens and hundreds of people to gaze and gabble; and every time-beat seemed to add perceptibly to the throng. There was nothing to be heard but a great din of gongs beaten with frantic vigour.

"That's funny," exclaimed the *attaché* suddenly.

"What's funny?" echoed every one.

"Why," he replied, pointing with his hunting-crop, "there is one fire-brigade coming already. It's not ten minutes since the first smoke was seen. Generally it takes at least an hour to wake them up." He continued to mutter exclamations to himself which remained quite unheeded. Every one was engaged in watching this new development.

Dozens of little white flags covered with black characters now tossed above the seething blue-clad throng which already completely blocked the raised driving-road. Men on the edge of this highroad, forced back farther and farther by the violent pressure, began tumbling down the embankment just as pebbles roll down a beach. They raised puffs of dust as they fell, as if they were human projectiles discharged and flung on the ground by the explosion of passions. The din made by the gongs became so uproarious that every

other sound—the shouts, the cries, the hum of the mob—was completely drowned, crushed, and irresistibly beaten down by the ceaseless roar of bronze and iron.

"Do you understand why we came down here?" shouted Peter Kerr into Mrs. Hopeful's ears. She nodded anxiously and did not speak. She was beginning to understand what an Eastern crowd can be. It was a realization of Milton's Pandemonium.

On the highroad, in spite of the great press of people, the gongmen and flagmen managed somehow to force their way ruthlessly forward; and behind them, for an instant, the anxious little riding-party, halted at the mouth of the lane, had a glimpse of a great mediæval-looking brass-bound pump carried by a horde of staggering, sweating men. The weight must have been immense, for the bearers cried a storm of frantic protests at being forced along so rapidly. They were like a great pack of dogs, tearing, wrenching, pulling, fighting with something which dragged them relentlessly along. At last one man, in clear view of the little party, suddenly removed his shoulders from the burden with a violent cry and a wave of his arms. He was utterly exhausted. Instantly some of the officers, hurrying at a jog-trot beside the great pump, felled him to the ground with the iron hooks they were carrying; and throwing up his arms, the wretched man rolled down the embankment as if he had been poleaxed. In the eyes of the little party it became a sort of Juggernaut's car; woe to him who released his hold.

"Oh, how brutal!" cried Mrs. Hopeful, shutting her eyes and shuddering as she understood the scene. The men of the party became more and more nervous. They were now completely shut in: they were wedged together as in a vise by the sweating masses of humanity around them. Adding to the danger of being thrown and crushed, were numbers of long country carts which had been obliged to escape from the main road, and whose drivers were now trying to

force their way into the lane behind, in a paroxysm of fear and amidst a storm of shouts.

"Damn you!" cried Peter Kerr angrily, as a carter standing upright on his shafts drove his team right into their ponies in his effort to enter the lane and force a passage. The mules, thrown on their haunches as they collided, kicked and squealed in discordant tones. Kerr swung the lash of his hunting-crop clear and without compunction began furiously lashing at the man, who fell back on his cart. Then, without stopping, Kerr turned his attention to the team and beat the luckless animals savagely back. The others of the party, surprised at his sudden anger, merely looked on; whilst very soon the carter, at first merely panic-stricken, began to call oaths and make furious gestures. Kerr, roused more and more, though he did not understand what was being said to him, was about to resume his onslaught, when the young *attaché* interposed.

"Be careful, be careful," he said nervously. "You can take care of yourself, but remember the ladies. This is the devil of a mess."

He placed himself so that Kerr could strike no more without hitting him.

But the carter was becoming more and more excited. Having an appreciative audience, he was now goading himself on by the sound of his voice and daring this outlander to come near him again. He bared his sinewy brown chest and shook his long whip. In a few minutes he might have backed up his words with blows and started an ugly brawl had not a new sensation among the crowd whirled him into oblivion as a straw is engulfed by a wave.

All down the street the people now began to tumble back with excited cries, putting their arms above their heads and calling, *"Ping lai-la, ping lai-la."* The cry was swiftly taken up and repeated meaninglessly by a myriad voices, until it seemed to race like a prairie fire into the distance, leaving havoc behind it. Those who could not understand what was

happening were routed by the tremendous pressure of those who did understand. The little party began to fare badly, for their ponies became more and more unmanageable.

"Keep your seat and hold your pony up whatever happens," shouted Peter Kerr into Madame Boisragon's ears, trying to save her legs from being crushed. "Hold him up, hold him up," he repeated furiously.

Once again he used his crop unmercifully all round him, spurring his pony tremendously and hurling him this way and that. Somehow the crowd managed to find outlets invisible to the eye, and the pressure, which had become unbearable, slowly relaxed. Then on the high driving-road the reason of the *sauve-qui-peut* was made clear.

Soldiers were coming—many soldiers, evidently.

Slashing about them with their short riding-whips and riding recklessly was a confused mass of savage-looking cavalry, who from their looks might have been Genghis Khan's horsemen revived from the dead. Their black turbans folded low down and half masking their bronzed faces; their loose tunics of crimson cloth, edged with black velvet; their "tiger-skirts" of the same brilliant colouring which they wore over their legs—all these things were strangely barbaric and strangely threatening. Each man had a carbine slung on his back and a heavy curved sword at his side, whilst some had bandoliers of cartridges, and others none. Mixed together and yet preserving instinctively the curious formation of irregular cavalry—the cavalry which lumps its horses as closely as possible in knots of dissimilar size—they presented a remarkable spectacle.

The first band passed so rapidly that they were gone before there was time to do more than barely notice these details. The confused blue wreckage they left behind on the grey highway—men thrown on the ground, men standing stupidly dazed from the blows they had received, men still crouching on the steep embankment in attitudes of supplication—this blue wreckage was slowly coming to life again, when a fresh movement of fear was communicated to all. As a

current of electricity passes, so did the knowledge speed to the mobs that this irregular mass was only a vanguard. At once the scramble began anew; and this time the highway was as completely cleared as if a whirlwind had passed over it. Even those who had been trampled under foot somehow managed to get away. Now the high roadway, as far as the eye could see, was entirely abandoned to this savage soldiery.

To the little party at the mouth of the lane it was just as if a blue patchwork curtain had now been completely drawn aside. The high roadway became a stage—so brilliantly lighted by the golden sunlight that every detail was clear.

They now saw advancing a dense mass of these picturesque horsemen, with a group of great black and yellow banners flaunting high above them. There were perhaps a dozen of these huge barbaric triangular flags, hanging down so low that they literally draped their bearers and their bearers' ponies. The tramp of so many countless hoofs raised great clouds of dust which floated ever more densely and at times almost completely enveloped the long lines of men and animals.

In the brilliant light flooding the roadway and catching the violent red of the men's tunics—with the gaudily painted shop-fronts framing it all—it made a wonderful morning scene.

For a while this host advanced like this in stern silence. Then there were a number of sun-flashes as the trumpeters raised long brass trumpets; and instinctively the trampling ponies and the long lines of men seemed to stiffen in anticipation of what was coming. Suddenly the music began—a music which once heard can never be forgotten. Beginning to blow irregularly, the trumpeters first touched a high note and held it in long, quavering, mournful, thrilling blasts—blasts which were constantly reinforced by the music of other trumpeters, who, joining in this strange chorus as they felt inclined, made the volume of sound rise and sink in a blood-tingling manner. Then, without any warning, as if a sudden exhaustion forced them all to it, the trumpets

dropped two octaves and roared in unison for a few brief seconds a tremendous bass chorus which sounded like the deep-chested thunder of the heavens. It was splendid.

"Oh, oh!" cried Mrs. Hopeful, panting with excitement and dropping her reins.

"What is it?" everybody asked.

"That—that," she answered, shutting her eyes and pointing. "Have you ever heard anything like it in such a setting—oh, those notes!" The little woman shivered, so excited had she become.

The leading files were not more than forty or fifty yards from them when the youthful *attaché* suddenly showed renewed anxiety. Once again his *mafu* had ridden beside him, and had talked volubly.

"We must get into the lane and out of sight at once," he exclaimed as he understood what was said to him. "My man says these are Tung Fu-hsiang's Mohammedan soldiers, who have come from a distant province. They are absolute barbarians and have just finished putting down a rebellion. They might attack us. Quick—before we are seen."

Filled with a new alarm, they forced their way into the lane in single file and were soon quickly swallowed up in the crowd. Kerr, glancing back, could see that the dense columns of smoke now pouring from the buildings on fire were attracting the soldiery. Perhaps they were going thither—perhaps they had a special mission. In any case, their heads were all turned in that direction; their party had not been seen. Kerr breathed a sigh of relief.

They found that the waiting crowd in the lane extended for half a mile or more, but in all that concourse they did not see a sign of woman. The women had hidden themselves at once: it was one of the most ominous signs of the East. The little party remembered now that neither had they seen that morning a single official cart with its customary escort of outriders. Had it been generally understood that this was coming?

Kerr rode along moodily wondering to himself what it all

meant. Things seemed to be more involved than ever. How could Europe ever understand! He was only just beginning to—after all these months; and yet what he understood was very little. What was the use of the richest concession if it meant fire and sword at any moment—that is what he wondered; and what would Lorenzo have to say, was what he wondered next.

The rest of the party were riding close round the two ladies, only thinking of what they had seen. The youthful *attaché* had placed himself between the two ladies and was now talking importantly.

"As soon as we get outside the first Gate," he was saying, "I think I shall send back a *chit* to the chief. I am sure no one knows yet that those soldiers have been brought into the city. That they should have come so suddenly is a very curious thing; and personally I believe that the fire at that big Yamên and their arrival were specially arranged. But you can never really know here—that I admit."

He nodded his head very wisely and hunted in his pockets to be sure he had not lost his note-book.

"But what does it all mean, what does it all mean?" cried Mrs. Hopeful in agitation. Until just now she had been interested only in the purely dramatic and picturesque side: that she might possibly have been cut to pieces filled her with panic—when the danger was by!

"It means anything or nothing," said the *attaché* crossly. He disliked being questioned. Perhaps he had been more than a little alarmed himself. "How can I say what it is? Only China is disturbed—very disturbed."

"I know what it means," replied Madame Boisragon, speaking for the first time.

"You know, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Hopeful, leaning forward to look into her face. "How can you possibly know?"

Madame Boisragon coloured a little.

"I know what I heard from my husband by letter a few days ago," she said with some hesitation. Kerr had just

come up, and she threw a rapid glance in his direction to see whether he could hear. Apparently he was still buried in his thoughts.

"Well?" said Mrs. Hopeful.

"It was nothing much," explained Madame Boisragon, "but he insisted that there was no time to lose and that in a month the whole political situation would have changed. There would be complete reaction, he said."

"Do you hear that, Jack? We must hurry up if our schemes are to go through!"

Mrs. Hopeful leaned across and tapped tall, thin Mr. Smith on the shoulder with her whip. Kerr, who had overheard the last few words, felt more angry than ever for some reason. He was almost rude to one of the other men who addressed some unimportant remark to him. Suddenly he wished that he had taken Lorenzo's advice and not come.

They passed into the country at length, and no sooner had the massive city walls sunk out of sight than the incidents of the early morning somehow faded completely away. They might indeed have been a thousand miles away from Peking the potential, Peking the inscrutable. They clattered through little mud villages which knew nothing and cared nothing for any mad city turmoil—villages still sunk in summer sleep—villages blissful in their ignorance. The country carts, which emerged from roads now almost hidden by the ripe crops of *kaoliang,* or giant millet—marvellous crops standing eight or nine feet high—politely stopped to allow them to pass. Their drivers showed not a trace of any latent animosity to the European. It was the city alone which seemed infected with strange moods: here there was only summer peace.

All day they travelled through a country covered with these bounteous crops; and very late in the evening, tired and sore and burnt, they reached at last a rude stone-strewn village at the foot of the mountains. Here they camped,

after the manner of travellers in the East, in a flea-smitten inn. Carnot, however, had been as good as his word, and their discomforts were comparatively few, for their carts had arrived and the magic of their servants speedily overcame all difficulties. Inquisitive faces, it is true, peered in on the little party through every gap in the broken paper windows, as they ate their supper, and commented in guttural whispers on the idiosyncrasies of the white man—but no one minded, since such things had to be.

Later on, in the night as they lay a little sleepless after the strenuous day, the endless sound of bells was borne to them and grew from hour to hour ever louder and more insistent. The streets of the rude little village seemed to be alive with bells—clanking camel-bells, silver-toned mule-bells, and little tinkling sheep-bells, as well as many other kinds. There was one endless message of bells—bells coming and going; bells angrily protesting at the turning of night into day; bells sadly acquiescing in the set scheme of endless toil.

"Did you hear the bells?" inquired every one in the morning—though one might as well have inquired if the bright stars shining through the broken paper windows, or the white moonlight, had been noticed. Was this not the land of bells?

As the little party came out, one by one, on the stony road which ran past the village inn to investigate matters, they found that an endless procession of camels that had travelled down the passes at night was still blocking all traffic. They watched them in silence for a long time. *Clank-a-clank, clank-a-clank,* said these bells, as their drivers slowly led the beasts into corrals and allowed them to rest; and when the camels had finally made room, travel-stained and sun-blackened shepherds, with little blue-cloth packs on their backs and long staffs in their hands, began driving along great flocks of fat-tailed Mongolian sheep, which raised such a dust that one almost choked. These bells said *tink-a-tink, ting-a-tink,* softly yet gaily, because the silly sheep thought they were only going to pastures new.

"This is enchanting," cried little Mrs. Hopeful as they finally decided to go on. "We are going to have the most beautiful time in the world." And forthwith they started up the Pass.

The village was a veritable animal-village—a village consisting of one endless stony street leading the way towards the Pass. Every house was a stable or a grain-shop—rough, rude buildings dinted with work and rain and storm and snow and somehow very biblical in aspect—and every man and woman and child in the village was a servant of animals. Now animals were being busily counted, animals were being fed, animals were being watered—there they stood, camels, mules, ponies, donkeys, sheep, goats, and pigs, all impartially mixed as in Noah's Ark, gaily ringing their bells with every movement and showing in countless ways that there is a brotherhood of four-footed beasts just as there is a brotherhood of two-legged men. The mountain air was fresh and sweet; and though the sun was already high in the heavens, it was very different here from the drowsy plain below.

So with the impression of these things strong in them, the little party mounted ever upwards along the winding mountain road, forsaking the crowded animal village with sudden regret, and conscious that they were in a new world bearing but little relation to the scenes they had so recently left behind them. Here everything was happy and untainted.

They passed through the broken remains of a strong embattled gateway, and very shortly they had lost all sight of human habitations. Now there was nothing but the rock-strewn, gaunt mountain-sides and the stony roadway.

Upwards and ever upwards climbed the roadway, sometimes very steeply, ascending as if with a great effort, sometimes pushing on in sweeping curves which carried one imperceptibly to a higher level. Water, crystal-clear and so different from the dolorous streams of the plain, trickled and rippled in the gullies and gave a renewed sense of freshness and pleasantness. Dots and puffs of dust high up on the roadway met the eyes of the little party at frequent intervals, and as they

came nearer to these signs of life, a tinkle of music was borne to them ever more clearly. Flocks of sheep or lines of pack-animals were approaching. The drivers, sometimes mounted on a mule or a camel, sang to themselves in this solitude, and when they came abreast of this little party of wayfarers hardly did more than turn their sleepy eyes towards them. What did they care? They were men of the road, fated until old age or death released them from this toil to travel up and down between grassy Mongolia and sunburnt China.

There are monuments, too, on this roadway—history was strewn there in broken, disconnected pieces, to be read by those who care to read. Sometimes on the shoulders of a towering height would be the ruined remains of a grey watch-tower; or on the very road itself would stand a gateway with the great iron-sheathed gates still withstanding the ravages of time, and showing how this road, in case of necessity, had been sternly barred against all travellers. Broken blocks of carved stone lay in masses—forgotten, uncared for, only marking how once each inch of this way was more precious than silver and gold and must be held to the death by devoted train-bands. Now the barren mountain-sides, once the scene of many encampments, were only enlivened by an occasional camel-corral in which a few camels, sick or weary from too much toil, were reposing under the guard of a solitary man who sat perched on a rock eyeing the traffic of the winding road with unmeaning looks. And in this wise, not speaking much and greedily drinking in this new aspect of Chinese life, hour after hour the little party slowly crept up the Pass.

The vast work they had come so far to see took them all by surprise. At every turning during one whole hour they had craned their necks and tried to discover it in vain: a dozen times they had chorused their disappointment—and even said that they disbelieved in its existence, as once upon a time erudite writers stupidly disbelieved. And then, suddenly, there it was.

Calmly, indifferently, yet majestically creeping on its way; climbing without effort the tallest peaks and slipping down the deepest slopes; with square watch-towers always rising regularly at the stated intervals and giving it a frowning and fearless aspect amidst the sea of rugged mountains—there ran the grey outline of the Great Wall of China on its endless journey to Central Asia in utmost solitude and now entirely deserted by man. . . . It was splendid.

"Isn't it perfect?" called little Mrs. Hopeful in poetic ecstasy, as she breathlessly surveyed the classic work; and then, without waiting for an answer, she suddenly scampered through a fortified and half-deserted muleteers' village to gain the summit as soon as possible.

They dismounted in a party a few hundred feet below the work and scrambled up a pathway. In very few minutes they had mounted the wall itself and were walking up the sloping platform to the tallest part they could see. . . .

All the afternoon they sat or walked about in perfect happiness. It was almost as if they were on the roof of the world. To the north and west were nothing but rugged mountains; to the south and east the vast alluvial plains of China—now one laughing summer cornland flashing in the sun and most pleasant to the eye. Distance no doubt lent enchantment; contrast with cityless and untilled plains enhanced its riches; but at least it was clear from here above why this Chinese land had always appeared in the past to the outer barbarians so delectable. It was the lure of these plains which had made them cascade into the country in relentless hordes; it was the Alps and Italy over again. . . .

Night came slowly and reluctantly on the top of these mountains, but patiently the little party waited. They watched the sun-ball's last glow disappear in the west and turned their eyes to the cold light of the moon, which had already risen. Clearer and clearer did the silver light become, until it filled heaven and earth in a flood of unbelievable brightness. There was not a cloud, not a speck on the dome of rich blue; and now in the night the great Wall seemed to

creep along like some living thing, its most distant curves lighted up in icelike coldness. All the world now slept: the Wall alone was wakeful, prepared to fulfill its task and watch the frontier until the crack of doom. . . .

"I could sit here forever," murmured Mrs. Hopeful at length. "Oh, let us not go until dawn."

Only when the moon was waning did they think of moving, and then they spent the beginning of day in wending their way down. It had indeed been an experience.

That same afternoon they went to the Tombs of the Thirteen Mings, which are set in a jewel-like amphitheatre of green hills and have a world-famous avenue of stone animals leading to their vast halls. But somehow the memory of that moonlight and the silent night kept them from enjoying this second sight as they should have done—for in the sunlight they could only think of the moonlight and the majestic work which had so sleeplessly watched for more than twenty centuries over the safety of these plains.

CHAPTER XXIV

"On s'attend à tout, et on n'est jamais préparé à rien."—MME. SWETCHINE.

A LINE of Peking carts was drawn up in front of the hotel when the party rode in from their diverting expedition. In the dusk they could just see any number of boxes and packages being carried indoors; so there were new arrivals and new intrigues preparing! As soon as they had bid each other *au revoir,* Kerr went hurriedly in search of Lorenzo.

Lorenzo was in the hall, waiting for him, having heard the noise of their arrival.

"Well?" said Peter Kerr a little anxiously, after they had exchanged greetings. Somehow he had the feeling that he would hear something unpleasant; his companion's first words at once confirmed this. Lorenzo was not in a good humour and showed it.

"Things are not well," he replied gruffly. "I required your presence urgently two days ago, and there was no means of getting at you. What the devil made you go at such a time as this?"

"What has happened?" asked Kerr, not wishing to hear further recriminations.

"You have not heard?" said Lorenzo incredulously.

Kerr shook his head.

"There has been a *coup d'état,*" said Lorenzo lugubriously. "We don't know any real details about it yet save what the Edicts say—which is, that the old Empress has taken things into her hands again and that the young Emperor and his reforms are discredited. Some say that the Emperor is a prisoner and some say he is really dead."

Kerr whistled thoughtfully. "That accounts for what we saw," he said, and thereupon he detailed to Lorenzo the

strange fire they had witnessed and the sudden arrival of that avalanche of cavalry.

When he had finished, as Lorenzo said nothing, he turned to their own affairs.

"Do you think it possible that the others have stolen a march on us during this interval?" he inquired.

"I don't know," answered Lorenzo gloomily. "That is why I am angry. If I only knew! Unfortunately I have my suspicions, and we should have gone to the old Prince and pushed our claims on his attention again."

Still discussing matters, the two men went to the hotel-bar and ordered something to drink. The room was nearly full of the new arrivals—tired and dusty from their long ride in from the railway-station.

"Listen to them cackle," said Lorenzo disdainfully. "They are Frenchmen, Belgians—a whole horde has arrived. Of course their business is coming to a head. They have shown immense energy during the last few months. I am sure their contracts are as good as in their pockets; whilst our contracts——"

He twisted the glass the *boy* had handed him irritably to and fro in his hand, and frowned in silent anger.

"I have done what I could without you," he continued finally, "but when I received warning that this was coming three days ago, we should have been ready and have gone and sat down by the side of that Prince until we got his promise to move at once. We should have stayed with him a whole night if necessary. Now it may be too late."

"But we got his formal promise last time we saw him," argued Peter Kerr. "He would have only repeated that. If it can't be done, it can't be done."

Lorenzo laughed a short staccato laugh.

"I am afraid," he said, "that you will never understand the heavenly system of this delightful country. A promise of that sort is only a promise if it can be enforced at the right time. That is the important point. When that psychological moment is past only God Almighty could perform the

miracle of getting what has been promised carried into effect. It is all a game of chess and nothing but a game of chess."

Peter Kerr drank down his whisky-and-soda before replying. He likewise was now considerably irritated, but he was wise enough not to wish to show it.

"Perhaps I have not understood," he admitted finally. "But the main question now is what to do next. I am willing to follow your advice at once, no matter what it costs. Tell me what to do and I will act."

Lorenzo visibly relented. He was always flattered when Kerr deferred to him.

"We can do nothing to-night," he said more calmly. "I shall try and find out by to-morrow morning what these people are really up to. Then we can act. I wonder very much whether that man Boisragon is coming too."

Kerr shifted his position ever so slightly. A servant entering the room with an immense stack of envelopes and papers saved him from the necessity of answering. Most of the mail matter was for him, and Lorenzo continued to study him curiously as he rapidly glanced at the addresses. It seemed that every person he had ever known had written to him, for there were big envelopes and small envelopes, and long envelopes and square envelopes, with a variety of stamps almost large enough to begin a collection with.

"Well, I must go through these," he said finally, gathering up his correspondence. "By to-morrow we ought to know what to do."

He nodded to Lorenzo and passed out into the hall on his way upstairs. Half-way up he met Mrs. Hopeful coming down.

"Oh, you too!" she exclaimed, pointing at his letters. "I hope your correspondence does not have a bad effect on *you!* Jack has a pile that makes him quite impossible. Our scheme seems hopeless to-night, and Jack is deep down in the dumps. It is so provoking after our lovely trip. The only person who seems really happy is Madame Boisragon."

"Oh," said Peter Kerr, suddenly pricking up his ears. "Is that so?"

"Yes," sighed Mrs. Hopeful, beginning to go on. "She seems to have all the luck. Apparently her husband's business is booming. All these new arrivals are in the same syndicate, you know," and with that she disappeared.

Kerr sat down in his rooms to read his letters in a somewhat savage mood. Instinctively he avoided communications from his own men at work in the provinces, and sought out first those letters which appeared not likely to be capable of annoying him. Had he done exactly the opposite he would have saved himself some annoyance. For when at last he came to the letters from his various survey-parties, he found that they contained data which quickly changed his mood. Practically all the routes had been satisfactorily settled on, and as a result of the rough preliminary surveys which had now been completed Kerr was advised that it would be possible to reduce materially the original estimates of cost. No engineering difficulties of any sort which had not been anticipated had been encountered, and a practical knowledge of the country now confirmed most of his original assumptions.

By the time he had finished reading he was in a very different mood. He arranged his papers and began planning what he should do on the morrow. It would now be possible to make definite tenders—with the aid of the interpreters he would have all these estimates and plans put into Chinese, as Lorenzo had been constantly advising him to do. He had not felt it safe to do this previously, for he did not like committing himself so definitely. Now, with his fresh data, he knew exactly what he could undertake. He was greatly relieved.

Presently, after he had dressed himself, he went along the verandah.

"Can I come in?" he said, tapping on the wooden shutters.

"Is that you?" called Madame Boisragon.

"Yes."

"I am lying down," she replied in a tone which somehow belied her statement. "I have a nasty headache from the sun. I want to rest."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Peter Kerr in a tone of sharp disappointment. "I hope it will pass."

He waited to hear if she had anything more to say, but Madame Boisragon remained silent, and so, reluctantly, he went away.

That same evening Baroness Waffen had a few people to dinner in her Legation. The dinner had been more lively than the run of such dull little affairs, for every one was somewhat excited with the unexpected turn political matters had taken in the old capital, and there was no end to the flood of speculations which was unloosened. The diplomatic world, having been openly alarmed during the past few days, had telegraphed voluminously for instructions, and it was now no longer a secret that guards were coming to protect the Legations—about four hundred sailors in all. It was generally admitted that the situation justified such a novel departure.

"They are cutting off heads like cabbages in the Palace, I hear," said De Boyar, "and that old Empress also has had any number of eunuchs thrashed to death."

"I wonder what will happen to the opera bouffe," asked the sarcastic man who had been so disagreeable a few weeks before on the subject of Mr. Smith.

"What do you mean?" inquired Baroness Waffen.

"The hotel and the concessionnaires," he explained; "I have christened them the Peking opera bouffe. What will happen to all those dear people?"

"I suppose they will continue to seek concessions just the same."

The sarcastic man shook his head and smiled.

"I cannot believe it," he said. "The company will have to break up. Carnot will paste on his front door 'RELÂCHE'

in large letters—and all the ingénues and the villains and the funny men and the thin men and the fat men will go their several ways. Business will become rather bad when the Chinese see our Legation guards. They will not want railways built or mines opened or rivers dyked—or any of those other amusing things which never get beyond the paper stage."

Baroness Waffen laughed: the man was really rather amusing.

"I shall be sorry if they all go," she said; "it will be deadly dull this winter without any outside element. Besides, the company has some nice members."

The sarcastic man made a grimace, hesitated, and then became merely sententious. He was a little afraid, being only a second secretary, to be quite frank before his superiors.

"The world is a remarkable place," he said unoriginally.

CHAPTER XXV

"Era la notte, e non si vedea lume."—ARIOSTO, *Orlando Furioso.*

"THINGS have become dreadful," said Mrs. Hopeful to the little knot of men in the hotel hall a few days later. "You are all as gloomy as if the end of the world were not only in sight but about to take place—let us say to-morrow morning. Confound all concessions, say I."

"What can you expect, madame?" said Lorenzo, with his exaggerated politeness. "This counter-revolution in the Palace has made things infinitely worse than the Emperor's silly experiment of two months ago. With the Emperor a prisoner in the hands of that terrible old Empress Dowager and those thousands of savage troops encamped round the city, business prospects are rather gloomy."

He said all this so fluently that Kerr looked at him sharply. He might have been a showman rattling off a set speech. There was certainly something undefinable in his manner which belied his words. And as he had only just come in after being absent the greater part of the day, Kerr began wondering what Lorenzo had been up to and whom he had seen.

"I shall give it up very soon unless I have some encouragement," said tall Mr. Smith, referring to his own affairs, which were rather a laughing-stock.

"I shall be glad when you do," sighed Mrs. Hopeful. "Think of civilized people resolutely camping in this city for countless months to beg privileges. I think it rather demeaning. This morning, being bored to extinction, I began discussing the matter with my *boy*. He summed up the situation in a quaint way. 'Mississee,' said he, 'just now Joss belong bad'—meaning that the gods are against one. Why

do we not admit it frankly like these philosophic natives?"

"The darkest hour is before the dawn," sententiously said a little Dutchman who was seeking a dyking contract on the Yellow River. "I am a great believer in the swing of the pendulum. Also I am a fatalist."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Hopeful, jumping up from the cane chair on which she had been sitting.

"What is the matter?" everybody asked, thinking something had stung her.

"I have just thought of something. Come here, Jack, and you, Mr. Lorenzo, and you, Mr. Kerr."

She drew the three men off in a corner.

"None of you are engaged to-night, are you?" she inquired anxiously. Their answers reassured her.

"Thank fortune," she went on, "for to-night is the thirteenth and I've several men coming for that séance which we have spoken about so often."

"Oh," said Lorenzo doubtfully, "cannot you get on without me?"

"No," protested Mrs. Hopeful, "you are one of the very men I want most of all. You *must* be of the party."

"Very well," said Lorenzo resignedly; "but if that is so, Kerr and I will have to finish up some business now."

"I am going to see about Madame Boisragon," said Mrs. Hopeful, starting off. "Remember, we rendezvous at ten o'clock sharp here in the hall."

A few minutes later Lorenzo accompanied Kerr to his rooms. He closed the door carefully before saying a word, and then went and stared for a minute or two out of the window.

"Success is in sight," he said at length, coming back and quietly sitting down.

"What!" exclaimed Kerr incredulously. "What do you mean?" He stood waiting on the other man's answer in an attitude of suspense.

Lorenzo took out his heavy pocketbook, and extracted therefrom a piece of lined paper.

"The Prince requests that you will attend to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, with your estimates and plans all ready, when they will be submitted at once to the Throne," he read aloud. Then he raised his eyes and watched Kerr with peculiar intentness.

"What do you think of that?" he asked.

"But this is very remarkable," exclaimed Kerr, walking excitedly up and down the room, "especially as it comes when everything seems topsy-turvy. How about the others who were going to drive us clean out of the market?" He laughed almost boisterously in his sudden glee.

"Hush," said Lorenzo, getting up and walking to the verandah windows. "My dear fellow, you must be more cautious. The battle is only beginning: nothing is yet won. On the contrary, the slightest slip will bring us to grief. If this comes off the way I anticipate, it will be a masterstroke."

He stood silent just on the window-sill and peered suspiciously down the verandah. Then he turned and sharply faced Kerr again.

"The slightest slip will bring us to grief," he repeated with marked emphasis. "I would like you to understand that."

Kerr had gone to his despatch-boxes and did not answer these remarks. He knew perfectly what Lorenzo implied: he intended to let it pass in his customary way.

"Everything has fitted in remarkably well," he said, arranging some papers and clipping them together. "We have all the surveys and figures now in Chinese. Those two interpreters are devilish slow, but they have at last finished."

He pulled out a big linen-lined envelope and began filling in on the cover a description of the various documents that had been completed only that afternoon.

Lorenzo watched him in silence for some time.

"I advise you to have everything arranged before dinner," he said, "as we shall have to start to-morrow morning at half-past nine sharp, and there is that engagement with Mrs.

Hopeful to occupy us the whole evening. It was rather neat the way I arranged this last move. I will tell you about it at dinner."

He got up and began tramping up and down the room, pulling at his beard and snapping his fingers. It was so curious that Kerr stopped writing for a minute and contemplated him in surprise.

"I believe you are excited, Lorenzo," he remarked.

The Italian paused in his walk.

"I am not only excited," he confessed slowly, "but I feel highly nervous, which is a much more serious thing."

"What," exclaimed Kerr incredulously, "you of all men!"

"Yes," said the Italian simply, "I am beginning to feel it acutely. If it were to last much longer——" He did not conclude, but made a violent movement with his hands as if he would throw everything away.

"Perhaps," he resumed, beginning to pace up and down again, "it is because I have had a devil of a day. I believe I have talked for eight hours without stopping. It is a long spell."

"Better take things easy and have a rest," counselled Kerr.

"I would go to bed now were it not for my promise to Mrs. Hopeful," he answered.

"Let us enjoy a small bottle," replied Kerr, getting up to ring his bell; "that will make you feel better." And understanding well how the other man was feeling, he tried his best to distract his attention.

Lorenzo and Kerr were the first two in the hall after dinner. They sat talking to each other in low tones whilst they waited for the others. Madame Boisragon had dined with Mrs. Hopeful and had now gone off with her for a few minutes: Mr. Smith was engaged in seeing what would be the most suitable room for the séance before the other people arrived.

Lorenzo was in a much better frame of mind now and was talking cheerfully enough, though he confessed he wished the morning had come.

"I believe," said Kerr laughingly, "that you are half afraid of this alleged spiritualism."

The Italian looked at him in a curious manner. His expression hesitated between a smile and a frown.

"Well," he said, "you have guessed the truth. I dislike such things intensely."

"Why?" inquired the other a little wonderingly.

"Because they bring bad luck—they attract bad luck. I am quite sure of it."

"You cannot really believe such a thing," protested Kerr. "You do not mean to tell me that doing certain things can have any possible effect on future events."

"I do believe it," said Lorenzo superstitiously, "and not only do I believe it but I am certain of it. I have had some anxious experiences."

"My dear fellow," said Kerr, laughing and getting up as the two ladies came downstairs, "you are confounding coincidence with cause and effect. Your attitude is ridiculous."

"I don't know what we are going to do," said Mrs. Hopeful plaintively, as she came up; "we cannot find a room that is quiet enough in this wretched little hotel. Downstairs is hopeless."

She went forward and greeted the two other men who had just come in. Then she came back to Kerr.

"Mr. Kerr," she said, "will you really mind if we use your sitting-room? It is the only place I can think of: otherwise we shall have the whole thing up. The wretched servants make far too much noise on this floor to get any results, I am sure."

"My rooms are at your disposal," said Kerr politely, though her request took him by surprise.

"Thank you," said the little woman warmly; "it is really sweet of you, Mr. Kerr. You are always so kind. You know Mr. Castilho, don't you?"

De Boyar and the Spaniard Castilho joined the little group, and after a few minutes the whole party went upstairs, talk-

ing volubly—for there is nothing in the world like a mixture of nationalities to set tongues a-clacking.

"Are we all here?" asked Mrs. Hopeful, jerking her head rapidly in every direction, as soon as they were in the sitting-room. She was all nerves to-night, and betrayed her excitement, even when she was standing still, in the manner in which she clasped and unclasped her hands and flashed her eyes. Tall, thin, polite Mr. Smith watched her from the middle distance in open trepidation, as if he suspected that her mood might induce extraordinary developments. There was something pathetic and even haunting in his strange manner: he was like the bird on the tree, and she the snake enchanting him.

"I think we are all here," answered Peter Kerr, after a pause. "Yes, we are seven, so that's all right. Now, Mrs. Hopeful, won't you prepare the *mise en scène?* You can turn everything upside down if you want to."

He offered her the freedom of his rooms with a smile and a wave of his hand.

"Nothing is needed but complete darkness, complete silence —and a large three-legged table," she answered monotonously, as if she were reciting something learnt by heart. "Now, let me investigate."

She walked rapidly to the windows and examined the night.

"The night is dark," she said mysteriously, as if she were speaking to herself. "There is no moon to shine, and even the little stars have gone to bed." She stood motionless. "Everything is right—quite right," she concluded.

Quickly she bent down, and herself unhooked the heavy wooden shutters before any one had time to come forward and assist her.

"They must be shut," she said to Peter Kerr, who was waiting for her instructions. "The windows as well as the shutters—everything."

She stepped back into the middle of the room and watched him carry this out. The others had begun to occupy them-

selves in various ways until their attention should be demanded. Lorenzo and Smith were now standing expectantly with their hands in their pockets, exchanging a few remarks; the Spaniard Castilho was examining some photographs; De Boyar, for a wonder, was silently reading a paper; and alone Madame Boisragon was seated with her chin on her hand. Her tall figure and her distinguished head, so well poised on her shoulders, contrasted oddly with little Mrs. Hopeful's sylphlike personality. Mrs. Hopeful was a little magnet: she, in her black dress, looked somehow like iron.

Madame Boisragon's eyes wandered aimlessly round the room until they alighted on the small table beside her, on which were two leather-covered despatch-boxes. Something must have attracted her attention; for suddenly she shifted her position, and soon, with a quick, nervous glance around her, she got up and very deliberately stood with her back towards the rest of the people.

She remained motionless for a moment in this attitude. Then very deftly she dropped the handkerchief she had in her hand on the despatch-boxes, and as she recovered it she flipped a large envelope on top of the boxes round.

She was so interested in deciphering the superscription that Mrs. Hopeful's voice made her start violently before she had entirely satisfied her curiosity. She contrived, however, to turn without any one noticing her peculiar preoccupation.

"That is all right now, Mr. Kerr," Mrs. Hopeful was saying in her nervous manner. "The first condition will be fulfilled. Now how about complete silence?"

Kerr paused and thought a bit.

"The only thing I can suggest," he said finally, "is that I get my *boy* up and post him at the top of the stairs with explicit instructions to stop any one coming near. Nobody will probably attempt to disturb us, but that will make it absolutely safe." Kerr was beginning to enter thoroughly into the spirit of the thing.

"Good, very good," cried Mrs. Hopeful in relieved tones.

"Tell him that it is devil-business and that if he doesn't play his part the devil will come to him."

Kerr laughed and rang his bell; and whilst they were waiting Mrs. Hopeful lectured everybody once more on the importance of being in earnest. Her mood had begun to communicate itself to all the others—for though at the beginning several had been openly sceptical, now no one made any facetious reply.

"I am sure we will get results to-night," concluded Mrs. Hopeful. "Still, though I am so sure, all of you must be good and try your best."

"I am already beginning to tremble," said the irrepressible De Boyar, who believed thoroughly in spirits, good and bad alike. He pretended to laugh, but his usual manner had departed.

The *boy,* having duly appeared, listened unenthusiastically to his master's instructions. It was only one more of the foreigners' mad freaks; and so resignedly he prepared to mount guard as he had been told at the head of the stairs. The party watched him through the open door with suppressed amusement as he carefully seated himself with his eyes turned towards the head of the staircase.

"He will go to sleep, I'm sure," commented De Boyar as they shut the door.

"Now we want a table," said Mrs. Hopeful, "and then the play can commence. Let me see."

Her eyes quickly examined the merits of the various tables in the room.

"That one, of course," she said, pointing to the one on which were the despatch-boxes. "Mr. Kerr, bring it into the middle of the room, please."

Kerr at once went for it. Madame Boisragon, with her handkerchief up to her mouth, watched him out of the corner of her eyes. She gave an almost imperceptible start as he took the big envelope in his hand, opened the first despatch-box, and, letting the lid drop with the envelope safe inside, fumbled for his keys. But his keys were apparently

not in his pocket, for suddenly he gave up his search; and putting the despatch-boxes on the floor, he quickly carried the table to the centre of the room and arranged chairs round it.

"Now please take your seats," said Mrs. Hopeful, "and I will arrange the table."

Silently all seated themselves, whilst Mrs. Hopeful brought forward and placed on the table a curious collection of things she had brought upstairs with her. There were some sheets of paper; a little Japanese bell with a monkey climbing up it; some Chinese silver ornaments; a thin brass plate; and last of all a violin. This instrument she placed so that it could not roll about unless the table tipped very violently.

Two of the lamps had already been blown out; there remained only a small one which shed a soft light, leaving half the room in deep shadow. Near this lamp Mrs. Hopeful now took her stand. To the six people watching her expectantly, she seemed in her white filmlike dress, with her fluffy curls and her strange, staring eyes, almost like a wraith. If the séance were not a success it would not be her fault.

"Now for the last time, please, listen," she said. "Nobody is to move or speak on any account, no matter how long we sit. When the spirits come, I will instruct Jack to ask the questions—nobody else is to utter a syllable. There is only one other thing I have to say. Whilst you must first of all have patience, it is equally necessary that you make your minds blank. Think of a great void with nothing in it but space, endless, endless space."

She had lowered her voice as she spoke until it had fallen to a peculiarly soft whisper. Now she made as if she would turn out the light. But suddenly she changed her mind; and with an exclamation, as if she had forgotten something, she went to the doors. She rapidly locked both the one leading into Kerr's bedroom and the hall door, placing the keys in her pocket. Then she came back to the lamp very slowly and thoughtfully.

A chorus of protests greeted this unexpected development, and Madame Boisragon half got up.

"That's not safe, Mrs. Hopeful," she said in some agitation. "Supposing anything were to happen in the hotel—supposing there were a fire?"

"Hush," replied the little woman softly, "it is necessary, it is all right. Hush."

She seemed almost to be casting some spell, for Madame Boisragon now sank back in her chair in silence, and the others raised no further protests. For a moment Mrs. Hopeful studied every one as a photographer does a group; then with sudden determination she blotted out the light. The room was inky-black. Not so much as a ray of light entered anywhere; it had been well arranged. Mrs. Hopeful came to her seat with only a faint swish of her skirts to show them that she had moved.

"Now," she said authoritatively, "clasp hands. It is not necessary to hold tight—it is only necessary to have the circle complete. Are you all holding hands?"

A murmur of assents greeted the inquiry.

"Now," she said. . . .

A deep silence fell on the little party—a silence which in the blackness soon became full of eloquent suggestions. The minutes, which at first dragged because each mind unconsciously clung to a sense of time, gradually melted into nothingness and in place thereof there was only unmeasured space. The breathing of the seven people melted into a common, almost imperceptible suspiration; and with body and mind gradually released from the ordinary fetters, a mystic circle was soon established round which electric waves ran more and more willingly and with ever greater frequency. Animal magnetism—an immense force about which nothing valuable is yet known—soon had hold of them all; and some hands, more responsive than others, trembled so violently that the things on the table began to shiver and dance.

"The circle is complete now," whispered Mrs. Hopeful. "Without unclasping, all take your hands off the table and place them on your knees."

There was a slight rustle as this was accomplished; then the deep silence came once more.

Perhaps half an hour may have passed before there was any new sign—perhaps it was nearly an hour. Then, as if some unearthly hand had stroked them, the violin strings suddenly sounded—first gently, then in a continuous vibration. Smothered exclamations could hardly be checked; if it were trickery it was being done with marvellous skill. . . .

"Hush," whispered Mrs. Hopeful, "hush."

Kerr, who was on one side of her, felt the perspiration run down her fingers so fast now in her excitement that he could hardly retain his grasp. Shocks passed into his fingers like a thousand pin-pricks. At one moment his hands felt like ice; the next moment as if they were on fire. And just then, as he was trying to analyze his sensations, the little Japanese hand-bell suddenly tinkled and then fell over and began rolling on the table with a clatter which sent chills over every one and made Madame Boisragon fall against the back of her chair.

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" she muttered.

"Hush, hush," came Mrs. Hopeful's voice, again speaking as if it were very far off. "Ah!"

The exclamation she gave was so sharp and so natural that Mr. Smith spontaneously spoke.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked gently.

"One of the sheets of paper I placed on the table *under* the violin has flown up and hit me in the face. It is now lying against my neck as if a wind were blowing it. It is time to question, Jack."

With an effort she forced her voice back into her soft whisper; she breathed rather than spoke the last words. Yet she was now trembling so violently that Kerr became alarmed.

Sudden exclamations came almost simultaneously from the Spaniard and the Italian before Mr. Smith could speak. Lorenzo followed this almost immediately by scraping back his chair and swearing softly in Italian.

"Either it is black magic," he muttered thickly, "or some-

body is cheating as cleverly as the devil himself. Who threw that?"

There was a general murmur of voices, which Mrs. Hopeful tried for a few moments in vain to still. Lorenzo had been hit in the face by something. He protested that it must have been thrown—it was impossible that it could have been propelled so violently by mere magnetic agencies. Kerr heard with growing surprise Lorenzo's real agitation; he was using Italian half the time, and he could not be made to stop speaking.

"Let us go on," said Kerr protestingly, at last. "No one has really seen the devil yet!"

"Silence," said Mrs. Hopeful peremptorily, "silence; and as soon as there is a fresh manifestation, Jack, begin the usual questions."

But these interruptions must have broken the mystic circle; for in spite of the silence which now followed, time flowed by without any fresh surprise.

They were beginning to get restive and chairs were creaking —for they had been in the dark for almost a couple of hours now—when, without any warning, the table suddenly rocked from side to side for a moment or two, and then fell over with a crash on Mrs. Hopeful's knees. Kerr pushed it up again without releasing his hands. A chorus of stifled exclamations greeted this development, and instantly Mr. Smith's voice sounded clear and calm.

"Will the spirits manifest their presence by rapping on the table?"

Breathlessly the party awaited the answer—and then suddenly a chair was kicked to the ground and Lorenzo called excitedly:

"I refuse to stand it any longer. Somebody clutched at my throat—I felt the fingers. Stop, Mrs. Hopeful, stop! I have got up."

"No, no," she cried, "sit down, sit down!"

Several others began pushing back their chairs. She let go

of Kerr's hand and tried in the dark to guess how many had moved—what had happened.

"Jack!" she cried in great agitation.

"Yes."

"Who has got up and who is still sitting?"

Mr. Smith's answer was drowned in the exclamations which followed a loud bang.

"What was that?" called De Boyar.

"There is some one in the room, I believe," replied Lorenzo. "Look out!"

Instantly there was complete confusion. In their excited condition this was too much for them. Every one got up and collided in the pitch dark, and a strange panic possessed one and all, as no matches could be found. A table with a lamp on it was overturned with another great crash—and Kerr, alone able to find his way in the inky black by feeling the walls, at last got to the hall door.

"Where are you, Mrs. Hopeful?" he cried, but in the confusion of cries she paid no attention to him.

"Master, master!" called the *boy's* voice outside.

"Yes, all right," answered Kerr, "look out!"

With a violent kick or two, he splintered a panel of the door, and got his hand through.

"Matches," he said furiously, "matches—give me your matches, you fool!"

He struck half a dozen matches at the same time from the box passed in to him, and in the great glare they made he beheld a curious scene. Dishevelled and white with emotion, yet a little ashamed of themselves, the six people were now standing as if after some great disaster. Without a word Kerr lighted one of the lamps and then proceeded to search round the room as if he really expected to find somebody there. There was nothing.

"Where's your friend?" he inquired a little sarcastically of Lorenzo as he took the keys from Mrs. Hopeful, who was now sitting utterly collapsed in a chair. Madame Boisragon, though she too was agitated, appeared much more collected.

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders. His calm had almost returned.

"You may laugh; nevertheless," he said doggedly, "there was something." De Boyar and Mr. Smith proceeded to question him closely; but they could learn nothing more than that he had heard somebody in the far-off corner.

Kerr unlocked the door, only to find Carnot in his pyjamas coming upstairs with several servants armed with sticks. They must have made a lot of noise in the room.

"What has happened?" began Carnot. "Robbers—thieves? The watchman rushed in to me just now."

"I am sorry you have been disturbed," said Kerr apologetically as Carnot peered into the disordered room with astonishment written on his features. "We have been trying to talk to spirits!"

"So it seems," said the Swiss drily, sniffing the smell of the broken lamp for a moment or two, and then retreating downstairs again without another word, followed by his wondering domestics.

"It has been a complete failure," said Mrs. Hopeful crossly to Lorenzo a few minutes later, as the party broke up in a very unsociable way. Kerr felt that in every way it had been very foolish, though for an hour and more he had been somewhat impressed.

CHAPTER XXVI

"On peut être plus fin qu'un autre, mais non pas plus fin que tous les autres."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

ALL people, whether they confess to a superstitious belief in presentiments or not, are susceptible at times to premonitions of coming evil. What the cause of this may be no one knows; but certain is it that Peter Kerr, after spending an unrestful night, woke feeling most curiously nervous about the future as well as openly wrathful that he had been actor in a grotesque scene. Whether he liked it or not, he must get up at once and prepare for a momentous interview—an interview which he already believed would be a complete and utter failure. He could not understand what possessed him —but he would have given a great deal not to have anything ahead of him that morning.

He had finished an unsatisfactory and hasty breakfast when Lorenzo joined him. Lorenzo was exactly the same as he always was—a little silent, a little cynical, and yet with the same repressed air of satisfaction Kerr had noticed the previous day. Apparently he had completely forgotten the incidents of their spiritualistic evening; for he talked in snatches on every possible subject save the subject of Mrs. Hopeful and her abortive yet tantalizing experiments. At frequent intervals he consulted his watch, as if he were watching not only the minutes but the seconds as well; and at length he gave a sigh of relief when this bad quarter of an hour was over.

"We must start in five minutes," he said briefly, getting up quickly from the armchair in which he had been comfortably reclining. "You can join me in the hall."

Kerr nodded his assent and went for his hat and stick. Then he came back to his despatch-boxes. He opened the top one,

and began turning over the envelopes and papers within, but by some strange chance the fact did not strike him at first that the big envelope he was searching for was not where it should be. In spite of his confessed nervousness, so far from his mind was the idea that anything could have happened to it, that, not finding it in the first despatch-box, mechanically he opened the second one and began hunting there. His search not being rewarded, he tumbled the contents of both boxes out on the table and began once again going through everything very slowly and carefully. As he came to the end of the papers, suddenly, with the force of a hammer-stroke, the knowledge struck him that the envelope and its contents had irrevocably disappeared.

"Good God!" he muttered to himself, now fumbling frantically with the papers and hardly understanding what he was doing. The thing was gone—there was no trace of it. That was what had happened!

He was almost stunned by the discovery of his loss. There was only one copy in Chinese—it had taken days of work to complete; he had only now the English originals—documents which were entirely valueless as far as the Prince was concerned. A unique opportunity would be lost; for from what Lorenzo had told him, the Prince contemplated summarily impeaching before the Throne the officials in whose hands the making of railway contracts had been placed by producing this complete and superior counter-scheme and thereby proving that favouritism had been shown and the pockets of the officials, and not the interests of the country, consulted. But now——

Kerr broke off hunting and thinking by ringing furiously for his servants. They came in fear and trembling, apprised by the very violence of the summons that something untoward had happened. He thundered at them whilst they stood there, only half understanding what he said and yet looking at him with awe. He roundly accused them with having tampered with his despatch-boxes, though in the midst of his rage he saw that such a thing was highly improbable. In a

fury, he repeated the same things again and again; whilst they, at length aroused to the danger which threatened them, protested their innocence with dramatic gestures. And then, just as Kerr, beside himself, was contemplating violence, Lorenzo, with his watch in his hand and a frown now on his face, suddenly reappeared.

"I have been waiting for nearly a quarter of an hour," he said, standing at the door. "We will be most certainly late——"

"I have been robbed," broke in Kerr angrily. "Those papers have been taken: no trace of them can be discovered."

"Robbed!" exclaimed Lorenzo in a changed voice, advancing quickly into the middle of the room. "Robbed!"

"Yes, robbed," repeated Kerr hoarsely, eyeing his despatch-boxes wildly, "common or garden robbed!"

The Italian pressed his lips together, and looked at him with a strange sternness.

"Are you absolutely sure?" he inquired. "This is most serious."

Kerr laughed bitterly.

"I understand all it means, you needn't tell me that," he said. "But the papers have disappeared—disappeared beyond a shadow of doubt. I have gone through my despatch-boxes half a dozen times already. Look!" He pointed to the litter he had made.

Lorenzo silently consulted his watch. He steadily studied the dial for a few seconds without showing what was passing through his mind.

"There is no time to investigate," he said very soon, rising quickly to the occasion. "There is no time for anything—but one last search. Look round the room—look everywhere quickly. They may have been dropped. If the worst comes to the worst we must take the English copies and chance it. But there is no time to lose."

Kerr, pale with excitement and with the perspiration beading his forehead, made a quick effort to follow Lorenzo's advice. But somehow he felt it was useless and that he must

accept the inevitable. Undoubtedly he had been cleverly robbed. There was no trace of anything—the papers had disappeared beyond recall.

At length convinced beyond doubt of this, he made a bundle quickly of the English duplicates and signified to Lorenzo that they had better go on. Without another word they descended the stairs and went out on the street.

With an abrupt movement Lorenzo now turned to the interpreters.

"Tell the carters," he ordered in a voice they feared, "to drive as fast as they can—to kill the mules if necessary. We must get to the Prince on time, no matter what happens."

He jumped into his cart; the others followed his example; and immediately the carters, goaded by the orders given and the promise of largesse, thundered along one behind the other at their quickest speed.

For a long time afterwards the memory of that drive remained with Peter Kerr. The rattle and thunder of the springless cart-wheels and the jarring which this frantic progress gave to his whole body; the shouts of his own particular driver, as he cleared the road, and the insufferable odour of garlic the man diffused as he swung his body this way and that and lavished all his driver's cunning on extracting the maximum speed possible from his mule by blows and pokes and savage bit-twisting; the great clouds of dust they raised and left behind, forming a perfect trail by which to trace their progress—all these things grew into Peter Kerr's brain and became companions or associates to the agonizing thought of his loss. *Rattle, clash, smash*—why had he been such a fool as to forget for an instant the caution which he had so long preached to himself? The despatch-box had been unlocked, of course! *Swerve, bump, jump*—Lorenzo had been always right and he always wrong. *Rumble, rumble, rumble*—to go to the Prince without those papers was like playing Hamlet without the ghost. There must be the ghost to act as the spur, the incentive—or else no play

was possible! How could they possibly explain to the Prince that the papers had been stolen—how could new ones be prepared in sufficient time? The Prince would immediately suspect something—possibly he would believe that they had been approached by others and bought so as not to interfere with what had already been done. Yes, that was what he would certainly think: that they had been bought. The Chinese were so suspicious wherever money, especially the making of money, was concerned. As they used all possible ruses among themselves, they had no difficulty in attributing to others the same resourcefulness, the same suppleness; until an absolute bargain had been made, when, of course, self-preservation demanded unswerving adherence to the contract so that credit should not be destroyed.

Bump, bump, bump—perhaps this failure at a critical moment would secretly please the Prince—it would more or less release him from the obligations under which he lay to his cheque-book. He would be able to say that as he had made all preparations to denounce colleagues to the Throne—as he had shown himself willing to jeopardize his own position but that at the critical moment those in whose interest he was working had failed him—he could not reopen the question. From every point of view the loss of the papers was more than unfortunate—it was disastrous. Kerr felt that it was the death-blow to his scheme. Owing to his own folly it had come to this after all these months; and his bitterness just then was so intense that the gaudy shop-fronts along the street suddenly became blurred into a fantasy of colour wholly unintelligible to his brain but somehow connected with the rocking and crashing of the blue-hooded cart and the biting clouds of dust which choked and teased him.

It was with relief that he at last felt his carter begin to relax the frantic pace at which he was driving. They had at length swerved into the narrower street in which lay the Prince's residence; and prudence and etiquette demanded that they should not gallop past everything as they had been do-

ing. On the high driving-road they might race: if they did that here and incommoded any official, his outriders would rush down on them and beat the carters with their heavy whips without compunction.

The red *chevaux-de-frises* round the massive entrance of the Prince's Palace grew up beside them before Kerr had realized that they had arrived. Mechanically he jumped to the ground and joined Lorenzo, who was once again anxiously consulting his watch.

"We are just five minutes late and no more," said Lorenzo in some relief, beginning to dust himself with his coloured handkerchief. "I have never travelled faster. And now," he continued, facing his companion in all seriousness, "what story are we to tell?"

"The truth," replied Kerr shortly. He could not find anything else to say.

Lorenzo shrugged his shoulders.

"The truth," he said, "can be used at times—sparingly. The question is, will it help us now?"

Without deciding the matter they went in. They noted that a great official sedan-chair was waiting in the courtyard and that a dozen outriders stood by their horses round it. It was quite true then—the Prince was just waiting for them and would go out the instant their business was completed.

They found him standing fully dressed in his official clothes —his bell-shaped hat and his beautiful long-coat, his simple girdle, his strange cloth top-boots, all complete. On this momentous occasion he wasted little time on ceremony; he motioned his visitors rapidly to seats and dismissed his attendants.

"These gentlemen have brought all the necessary papers?" he said to the interpreters. The interpreters repeated the question. Kerr mastered himself with an effort.

"Tell the Prince," he said very gravely, "that a most disastrous thing has occurred. After much labour, I had all the documents prepared in Chinese, as was duly arranged. They were placed in a tin despatch-box. During the last

twelve hours the despatch-box has been broken into and these documents have disappeared. We have had no time to investigate—we only know that the documents have disappeared. I am grieved beyond measure: all I can now offer to the Prince are the English originals."

The interpreters—themselves overcome with surprise, for they had heard nothing until now—translated word for word what Kerr said. The expression on the Prince's face changed in the most surprising manner when he had heard all they had to say. He fingered his girdle in great embarrassment, and his lips moved quickly as he muttered to himself.

"This is all very well," he said at length, "but without those documents I can do nothing. In a foreign language they are as useless to me as if they did not exist. I am sorry about the loss, but I can do nothing to help matters."

He concluded almost angrily—certainly petulantly—and Kerr became convinced that the forecast he had made to himself was correct. The Prince would throw the entire blame on them and disclaim all responsibility in the future.

"In three days I will have new copies ready," said Kerr. "I will send them at once."

"It is useless," said the Prince, cutting short the interpreters as they spoke. "It is a question of either to-day or never. To-morrow at daybreak the rival proposals will be examined by the State Council, and if there is no good ground for rejecting them they will be sanctioned."

He rose to his feet to signify that the interview was at an end—he himself had to go to the Palace at once, he intimated.

The adieus on both sides were curt and formal. Through the entire interview Lorenzo had sat rigidly silent—his face might have been made of marble had it not been that his eyes were alive with a fierce resolve.

They came back quickly to the hotel—wasting not a minute in the expression of vain regrets, nor indeed speaking one word. Upstairs they went in the same silence, and not un-

til the door had been shut and he had thrown himself into a chair, did Kerr show his real feelings.

"Curse it," he said thickly, "curse it! If I could only understand how this happened, this would be a day of reckoning."

The blood rushed to his face in such a flood of rage that his features became bloated and distorted.

Lorenzo, standing with his back turned, and apparently gazing out of the windows at the vast coloured pile of the distant *Ch'ien Men* Tower, which stood out so grimly against the horizon, now turned suddenly. There was something in his new attitude curiously suggestive of the panther about to spring. Yet there was also a certain satisfaction hard to explain. His keen eyes noted the Englishman's condition in a single quick glance. The moment had arrived. He moistened his lips in a peculiar mannerism of his.

"If you would discover the author of a crime," he said slowly, "consider who had an interest to commit it."

Kerr, deep in his gloomy and revengeful thoughts, looked up at Lorenzo, hardly understanding what he said. Then a new light broke on him, and with an exclamation he started forward.

"I know what you believe——" he began fiercely.

Lorenzo stopped him with an imperative gesture. There was something almost noble in the way in which he refused to be a party to any detailed discussion.

"If you would discover the author of a crime," he repeated a second time, moving slowly towards the door, "consider who had an interest to commit it. It is no business of mine."

Then, without another word, he quietly withdrew.

"He has left me to solve the problem alone," muttered Kerr to himself. He wondered a little why he spoke aloud to himself. "He has gone," he said dully, speaking for the second time. He took two or three steps and then stopped suddenly. "It can only be that," he said, convincing himself

by the sound of his voice. There was something fearful in the idea that a woman who had lain in his arms should have robbed him: it was as if somebody had treacherously stabbed him from behind when all his attention had been concentrated on the enemy in front. How and when had she done it—and why, oh, why? . . .

A new anguish—the anguish of a man tricked by a woman—mixing with his sullen anger, filled him with such an ecstasy of emotion that he found himself pacing round and round his sitting-room without knowing what he was doing.

"You fool—you fool!" he said violently, stopping and looking at his reflection in a mirror over the mantelpiece. His face looked back at him so sternly and so bitterly that an immense self-pity welled up within him. He was not to be blamed so much, after all—even a Solomon could be tricked. He had let things take their course, when he should have——

He stood contemplating himself with eyes which now only half saw; for a new idea had become born in his mind and was rapidly overwhelming everything else. The old Mosaic law was, after all, the only satisfying thing—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Without another word, fully determined on his line of action, he walked rapidly but carefully to the verandah and then towards Madame Boisragon's rooms.

The Japanese screen which shut off half the verandah had been laid aside by some careless servant, and thus the last excuse for him to pause was removed. He walked to the first window and called.

"May I come in?" he asked in a voice which was now singularly composed.

The silence which followed his question was more eloquent to him than a hundred answers; without a trace of hesitation he now invaded the privacy of her rooms.

"Lorenzo is right again," he remarked gloomily to himself. Madame Boisragon had gathered her few curios together, and an empty box on the ground showed where they would

soon be placed. He had often wondered whether she was mean because she spent so little money. Anyway, she would leave nothing behind: every trumpery thing would go. . . . In her bedroom all was already packed. Kerr contemplated these signs with steady eyes: everything was as he now expected.

A torn paper lying on the floor suddenly caught his attention. He stooped and picked it up; and holding the broken pieces together, saw that it was the draft of a telegram she had evidently despatched that morning. She announced that she was leaving at once. Well, he could see about that for himself.

For a moment the fear filled his heart that she would not return. Then a glance around her rooms reassured him, and with settled determination he slowly returned to his own rooms.

There was ample time, he found, for his hot anger to cool and give place to a sterner resolve. Well, he would see it through coolly. He opened his door leading onto the landing, so that no one could pass along without being seen, and seating himself he prepared to remain at his post indefinitely. He had one object in view, and he would pursue it relentlessly.

The tiffin-hour passed unnoticed by him—he soon lost his sense of time—and it was only the lengthening shadows forming fantastic shapes across the floor of his room which told him that the day was rapidly waning. Only once did he get up—to replenish his stock of cigarettes—and during these waiting hours he had ample time to drink the cup of his bitterness to the dregs. His wondering servants, coming cautiously upstairs and seeing him sitting there in gloomy silence, noiselessly disappeared, driven away by the fear of fresh explosions of wrath. Everybody was leaving him to work out the problem himself, he thought. Well, let them wait and see——

At last his patience was rewarded. For the hundredth

time, hearing footsteps on the staircase, he got up and went to the door. This time he was sure it was not in vain. That quick, light tread was unmistakable—she was at length coming back, at the hour he was generally out. He steadied himself for a moment, and then, timing it carefully, went rapidly out and met Madame Boisragon just as she mounted the last stairs.

He waved her gasp of surprise away with a stern movement of his hands. Her eyes had sought his face with quick apprehension; and with a woman's matchless intuition her brain had leaped at once to a complete understanding of what was coming.

"I wish to speak with you," he said, forcing himself to an unnatural calm. "Come." He put out a hand.

She drew herself away from him with a gesture of disdain—as if she rejected once and for all the intimacy his manner implied. In such a supreme moment it was perhaps her only course.

"Who are you," she said quickly, "to order me like that? What is the matter with you—what do you mean?"

"Come," he replied, holding to his point and seizing her arm in his powerful grip. "I wish to speak with you." He remembered afterwards that the weakness of her arm gave him an unholy desire to be brutal.

"Speak here, then," she said in a frantic attempt to maintain her calm, as the man's twitching hand informed her of the boiling volcano within him. But she could not release herself. "Speak—what is the matter with you?"

"The matter is—the matter is—God!" He broke off suddenly and with a brutal jerk forced her forward to his door.

"Unless you let go," she said breathlessly as horror gained her, "I will shriek, and the whole hotel will know."

"Shriek," he adjured her coldly, standing still and giving her time to do so. "Shriek, and I will tell all those who come what it is I have to say to you."

"The man is mad," she moaned to herself, her self-pos-

session breaking down as he forced through his door. He shut the door with a steady hand and searched for the key. The key was for some reason missing—he vaguely remembered something about the night before, and wondered whether it was that which had caused it to disappear. With a smothered oath, he accepted the fact, and turned towards her.

"Now," he said, releasing his hold, "I want you to confess that you are a common thief and have robbed me. Confess," he said.

Madame Boisragon's frightened eyes roved quickly over the room: there was no possible escape.

"You are mad," she sobbed, sinking into a chair. "You have already bruised my arm black and blue. You are a brute—a brute!"

"I would like you to understand," said Peter Kerr, coming a step nearer, "that you will have to confess or take the consequences."

Madame Boisragon sat up suddenly.

"The consequences?" she exclaimed blankly. "The consequences?"

"Yes," answered Kerr grimly, "the consequences."

For a moment the two eyed each other fixedly, and then once more the woman's self-possession broke down. There had come on to Peter Kerr's face a look of ferocity, of sheer animalism, which almost struck her to the ground. She let her arms drop weakly beside her, for terror now completely unnerved her.

"You who have loved," she moaned, "you who have smothered me in kisses—you who have lain on my bosom——"

"Stop," he cried hoarsely, "stop, or I will make you stop by force. What have I ever done that you should ruin me when success was within my grasp? I am now sure that it was you who robbed me—you who took my papers—and I will force you to confess. Lorenzo often warned me in so many words about you, but he was an Italian and I did

not believe him, for the thing was grotesque. And now the grotesque thing has come true!"

She raised her tear-stained face.

"Peter," she pleaded, "you have made me weak and broken. Let me go and I will tell you everything afterwards."

"You shall not go," he said, shaking with rage at the weak obstinacy which opposed him. "Confess what you have done—I tell you to confess."

He caught hold of her arm again and dragged her to her feet. She tried to break free but her efforts were unavailing.

"Coward!" she cried in a fresh paroxysm of fear. "Coward, coward, coward!"

"Confess," he said dully, "for the last time I say—confess."

He dragged her across the room, and reaching up to a rack, took down his riding-whip. With a smothered shriek she flung herself against his chest and tried to reach his face with her frozen lips.

"Great God," he exclaimed fiercely, "I will not relent. I will not—not for heaven or hell. I will flog you as you deserve. Now see——"

With a violent effort he tore his arm free and forced her to the ground. The sweat poured down his face as he swung up his whip—and then . . .

The door had opened so quietly that it took several seconds for the furious man to understand what his eyes saw. It was a little miraculous and very strange. For framed in the doorway, freshly dressed in a new check suit, with a gay flower in his buttonhole, stood Lorenzo, imperturbable and yet slightly smiling. Slowly Peter Kerr's mind absorbed the fact that Lorenzo had come back—that this was Lorenzo. He faltered in his contemplated action—and then, as if his arm refused its service, it fell to his side.

Lorenzo advanced quietly into the room and closed the door.

"I am afraid," he said very deliberately, taking off his hat to show that he intended to stay, "I am afraid that I am interrupting an interview of importance." He took a few more steps. "Yet," he added, producing a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his forehead, "I am prompted to do so by the knowledge that in all disagreeable affairs it is always best to have a witness."

Having said which, he watched with extraordinary phlegm the two as they disengaged themselves. Madame Boisragon dropped half fainting into an armchair: Kerr flung the whip hard on the ground and continued to look at him with unmeaning eyes. The man was very far gone, and the Italian saw and understood.

"My dear fellow," said Lorenzo, picking his words carefully, "it is possible by over-excitement to invite a veritable disaster in this hot, dry climate."

He advanced to the table and poured out a whisky and water.

"Drink," he said shortly, "drink and collect yourself, for we have a good deal to attend to."

Kerr took the glass which was offered him mechanically in his hands and as mechanically emptied it. The veins in his forehead slowly relaxed their ugly look, and soon the blood flowed more peacefully.

"Now that matters are more calm," said Lorenzo, "let us attend to the lady."

He refilled the glass.

"Madame," he said coldly, coming forward and bending over her, "I counsel you to drink this: it will restore you somewhat."

He raised her head and put the glass to her lips. After a moment she drank greedily; but no sooner had she emptied the glass than she fell back in her old attitude. She lay there as if she were not a living woman, but an inanimate object—a corpse—killed by Kerr's boiling passion.

"It is best to leave her," said Lorenzo indifferently. "She

will require some time to recover. You must remember, my dear fellow, that women are more highly strung than men. Now let me see——"

He sought for a moment in his pocket, and then very deliberately produced the missing door-key and laid it carefully on the table. Kerr made no comment.

"Now that we can speak plainly—after an interval of some weeks," continued Lorenzo, "I propose to make a number of remarks—in fact, to clear up things generally. First let me ask you for your congratulations."

Kerr looked at him blankly. He was rapidly recovering his calm.

"What do you mean?" said he.

Lorenzo laughed his clear, rich laugh, and then quickly stopped.

"I may permit myself a little gaiety," he said apologetically, "for the reason that my troubles are over. My Imperial Edict has at last materialized."

"What!" exclaimed Kerr, the colour leaping into his cheeks. "Your concession has gone through—is authorized?"

"Absolutely and unmistakably," replied Lorenzo very calmly. "The news has been home long enough for congratulations to come back to me, you see."

He took from his pocket a sheath of telegrams. "People are simply delighted," he said.

Kerr began pacing up and down the room: it was a day of surprises.

"Then you knew this——"

"Yesterday," answered Lorenzo; "but I thought it best not to make any confusion about it until this morning's business had been attended to. Now, I dare say in view of our mutual arrangement it may be of some comfort to you."

"Of some comfort!" exclaimed Kerr. "There is a fortune in the underwriting——"

"The Founders' shares will be very pleasant counters to play with," remarked Lorenzo, searching for his cigar-case. "We will mark them one shilling, and they will go

to a couple of hundred apiece, or else I know nothing about gambling. You had better wire to your people without delay."

"Of course," said Kerr. "I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you should have got what you deserved."

"My dear fellow," said Lorenzo protestingly, putting out a hand. He struck a match, and with the first puff of cigar-smoke his expression changed.

"We are forgetting things. Let us come back to the local situation," he said cuttingly, looking at Madame Boisragon. She was still lying utterly crushed in the same attitude; but he could see that now she was able to hear and understand all that was said.

Kerr involuntarily clenched his fist and frowned: Lorenzo, observing the change in him, shrugged his shoulders.

"It is a pity," he said, "that in the first place we did not pay more attention to the amiable clientele of this hotel. Had we done so very searchingly we would have discovered that"—he turned his head towards Madame Boisragon—"room No. 6 contained a very amiable young man who merits a good thrashing. This young person, it appears from what Carnot tells me, has been observing us very closely. He has not hesitated to listen to our conversations and has doubtlessly faithfully reported them to the estimable Boisragon his employer."

Lorenzo stopped a few seconds to puff at his cigar. He shot a glance first at Madame Boisragon and then at Kerr. Kerr was listening to him in open surprise.

"I am not a detective," continued Lorenzo, "so I am unable to tell you how a number of things occurred—for instance, what instructions Mr. No. 6 actually possessed and all he may have done. But I can tell you one thing to-day—that our papers would have probably disappeared in the night had they not been taken by this lady during Mrs. Hopeful's séance——"

"What!" cried Kerr, interrupting him. "Do you mean to say——"

Lorenzo cut him short by rising to his feet with surprising agility. He was just in the nick of time, for Madame Boisragon had quietly got up and was nearly on the verandah.

"Madame," said Lorenzo, this time in French, "it would be wisest for you to keep your seat."

"Come back," added Kerr warningly. White and speechless from rage and mortification, she sat down again. Lorenzo took the precaution of shutting the windows, and then resumed.

"I told you a rather surprising but true thing," he said. "You will remember how nervous I was about last evening; you will remember how curiously I acted; and you will also remember that at the end I said there was some one else in the room in the dark."

"Yes," said Kerr breathlessly, "I remember."

Lorenzo chuckled.

"Well," he said drily, "I was mistaken. There was no one but ourselves—only some of us had moved rather quietly."

He stopped speaking, and taking his cigar between his teeth, used both his hands to draw out his heavy pocketbook.

"Do you know anything about dress materials?" he inquired of Kerr. "If you do, you should recognize this."

He produced a little piece of black material with a hole through it.

"When the lid of your despatch-box" (Kerr started in fresh surprise) "slipped down with a crash last night owing to the lady's agitation, her dress caught. This morning as you were making your last search for the papers I picked this up on the floor just under the despatch-boxes. The problem is now fully solved."

"But the papers," said Kerr, struggling with the mixed feelings which overwhelmed him, "let us recover the papers at least."

"The papers, I fancy," he said with a cynical smile, "are probably being carried as fast as they can travel by Mr. No. 6, who, Carnot informs me, left Peking at eight o'clock in the morning. And now," he concluded, "unless you wish

to talk further with her, I propose that this lady be allowed to go too, as I have some business to transact with you. Madame, there is the door."

He rose to his feet and placed himself beside Kerr.

Slowly and haltingly Madame Boisragon left the room.

CHAPTER XXVII

"On aime à deviner les autres, mais on n'aime pas à être deviné."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

IN London, shortly after these events, Sir James Barker, seated opposite Mr. Elihu Jerkins, was very much occupied in gazing reflectively out of his office windows. He seemed to be studying the grimy walls of the buildings across the street with an amount of absorption hardly justified by their commonplace appearance. Also, as he had looked at them for nigh on forty years, he could scarcely hope to find to-day anything new in their aspect. It was so plain from his attitude that he had no desire to discuss matters further, that Mr. Elihu Jerkins, after he had allowed a certain interval to elapse, made the next remarks. And what Mr. Elihu Jerkins said was peculiarly characteristic of the man.

"It's damned funny," he commented slowly, shifting his feet about and studying the big banker's profile, "that is, if you look at it in the right way. We were both playing safety on our own stamping-grounds—you in London and I in New York—and, by gum, it appears to me the game just comes to that and nothing else, which is a good sell for both of us."

Sir James Barker did not answer at once this somewhat involved and cryptic speech. The buildings on the other side of the street seemed to have now acquired an overpowering attraction for him. He stared at them very steadily, for he did not want to make any mistakes.

The news had just been fully confirmed that a Brussels syndicate had definitely completed a contract with the Chinese government for building one half of the grand-trunk line which was the vitals of Kerr's great scheme. Practically this rendered impossible the carrying out of his

comprehensive idea. For in addition to what had been done by this particular syndicate, an American group, strongly suspected of being only a cat's-paw of very high and mighty personages, had virtually concluded a similar contract for another portion of the grand-trunk line. Allowing for the feeder-lines which would be subsequently acquired by these two groups, several thousand miles of railway had thus been irrevocably earmarked by others. There were also strong rumours in London that the Oriental Corporation had at last succeeded in inducing the government to give them open support, in preference to all other British finance houses, in order to offset the political effects of this great rival railway activity in China. Thus on all sides powerful combinations had arisen making the outlook quite hopeless for Kerr.

"There is certainly a lot of news," said Sir James Barker at last, "and I think we ought to be glad that we played safety, as you call it. It means, in any case, that we shall get our money back."

"Damn the dollars," growled Jerkins discontentedly and slangily, "if there's going to be no swag."

Sir James Barker permitted himself to smile as he at last swung his chair back to his desk.

"Let's look into figures," he said, "before we become too pessimistic. Of course we pool all these private options?"

Mr. Jerkins nodded and then smiled rather queerly. England's bad climate always put him out of sorts. He contemplated the other man working for a while, and then——

"Say, Barker," he began, "I don't want to appear inquisitive, but just when did it happen that you cut into the Brussels deal?"

Barker looked up from the sheet of paper on which he was making rough calculations, and suddenly betrayed a certain embarrassment in his manner.

"Well," he confessed guardedly, "it was some time ago."

Mr. Jerkins slapped his leg and laughed uproariously.

"I guessed as much a month or two back myself, and that's why I went in so strong with our own New York people."

"Oh," said Sir James Barker, a little curtly. He went on calculating and had soon finished.

"Our options in these two other syndicates are worth at least eighty thousand," he said, "and Kerr has really spent very little money. Including the survey-parties and other expenses, the last total I have is only £29,000. Even if we decide to let him stay for a few months longer to see what he can do, the amount will not be anything like the value of our options. So our money will come back—apart from what he may do on his own account. And," concluded Sir James Barker, "I have a little surprise for you."

"What's that?" said Jerkins, sitting up sharply.

The big banker laughed at his change of attitude.

"It was rather clever of Kerr," he remarked, "but we have got an option on 100,000 shares in this new Chinese Mining Syndicate."

"What!" exclaimed Jerkins, pulling some newspapers towards him and rapidly turning over the pages until he found what he sought. "This thing, you mean—the Great Northern Syndicate?"

"Yes, that thing," replied Sir James Barker with peculiar satisfaction.

"Good business," said Jerkins, rubbing his hands, "good man, that fellow Kerr. How did he manage it?"

Sir James Barker explained that he had been able to assist in certain matters in Peking, and as a result this option had been secured.

"Well, things aren't so bad after all," said Mr. Elihu Jerkins at length. "There *will* be some swag."

"We can only hope that the public will bite," said Sir James Barker cautiously. "Far Eastern politics are so treacherous that it is impossible to know what will or will not happen."

Jerkins laughed quite cheerily now.

"I believe, Barker," he said, "if you had this whole bank full of gold, you would only admit that the outlook was not entirely unpromising. You never bounce a bit."

Sir James Barker smiled.

"Perhaps it is our delicious climate," he suggested, looking at the rain which was now splashing against the windows. He was glad Jerkins was in good humour again, as he needed his co-operation very soon in another scheme. "Now how about Kerr: shall we authorize him to act at his discretion—that is, to stay on if he thinks it worth while? He seems to want to—from what he telegraphs."

"By all means, by all means," said Mr. Elihu Jerkins. "He may pull something out of the wreckage yet, and that will mean a little more on the right side of the account. Besides, it is rather rough on him, the way we were hedging all the time." And with that, the "conference," as Mr. Elihu Jerkins called this two-man talk, abruptly ended.

Sir James Barker had occasion—he put it that way to himself—to pass that same afternoon down the very street in which the Mays lived. He stopped his brougham at their door and inquired if by any chance they were in. To his astonishment he learnt that they had sailed for Canada, and might not be back for a couple of months.

"Too bad," he murmured as he got back into his carriage. He had wanted to give Phyllis May all this China news, as well as to learn if she had heard herself from Peter Kerr. Kerr had written to him very little lately: he was sending everything by telegraph; and though by this means Sir James Barker got all the facts, he did not learn the details. Barker had become rather inquisitive about a number of things.

During the evening he worked out a long telegram himself, explaining fully the position in London and authorizing Kerr to act as he thought most advisable.

In the course of the next day he received a brief reply. Kerr would stay—indefinitely, it said.

That very day Mrs. John West had been laughing excitedly to herself in the privacy of her own boudoir. "One

has heard of bringing down two birds with one stone," she murmured as she re-read for the twentieth time her Brussels correspondence, "but it is surely unheard of to bring down three birds—that is, a profit, a man, and a girl." Then she laughed again, delighted with her victory.

In doing this she was singularly wrong; for when one is amused at the expense of other people one should never incautiously assume that one is really laughing last.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER I

"Dans l'adversité de nos meilleurs amis, nous trouvons toujours quelque chose qui ne nous déplaît pas."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

PETER KERR was soon left quite alone.

There is something peculiarly disheartening, something crushing, something almost tragic, in being left behind on the scene of defeat—the more so when defeat has been directly invited by folly and is not merely the result of misfortune. Yet though a man groans and protests, the sun rises and sets in the same remorseless way; the same routine goes on around; exactly the same desires and wants are felt—Nature, inexorable and indifferent, must pursue her appointed course. Foolish is the man indeed not to be a philosopher—a stoic! For what does it matter if a single mortal raises his plaints—to-morrow must come as to-day. The world moves relentlessly on; and though every revolution is the signal for the crushing out of countless lives and waving of endless farewells, to-morrow will be just as beautiful as to-day and in the sum total there will be more laughter than tears. "Man," says Pascal, "is the weakest reed in the world—but it is a reed that thinks." And this is the reason why he so often cries.

Four days after the events which have been chronicled, a general exodus from the little hotel had taken place. The feeling had become so widespread that a great reaction had occurred in China—rendering all other hopes for success illusory—that Lorenzo's rapid departure was followed by that of nearly every concession-hunter and nondescript in the capital. Tall, polite Mr. Smith sighed many times, and at last openly admitted that his great idea was quite unworkable.

"It is very unfortunate," he briefly commented, as very diffidently he made his departure. Mrs. Hopeful, whose husband was wiring to her from some neighbouring place to hurry up, left at the same time.

"Good-bye, Mr. Kerr," she said as she got on to her cart, fixing on him her great wistful eyes. "Good-bye, good-bye. I wonder if we shall ever meet again. Oh, it has been a strange summer, and I am sorry for you." And the last sight he had of the little woman was sitting on the shafts of the retreating Peking cart waving her pale hands to him from behind the blue hood, and at the same time urging her old mule forward.

The next train carried off the little Dutchman who had dreamed of dyking the dread Yellow River. "These dommed Chinamen," he remarked, "are no use." All the Frenchmen and Belgians followed at once, with Kerr standing at the hall door, watching them grimly; and an American, who had only been seventy-two hours in Peking, started home announcing that *his* tale would be that it looked as if h—ll were coming. Kerr wondered where Madame Boisragon had gone to. She had disappeared more quickly than any of the others.

So in four days out of a baker's dozen there remained only Peter Kerr and a great collector of porcelain, whose horizon was entirely bounded by blue and white China, and blood-of-a-bull vases, and Imperial Yellow and willow-patterns and peach-blossom; and who, buried in this conceit, cared not what revolutions might be made by God or man. It was remarkable how quickly the change took place. As soon as the piles of portmanteaus and trunks and wooden cases had disappeared and left the hotel noiseless and empty, a new era had manifestly commenced.

Carnot, dismally reflecting on the changed times, soon made it his habit to visit Peter Kerr twice a day—once in the morning and once in the afternoon—when he poured out a ceaseless stream of reflections, prognostications, warn-

ings, gossip, jests, and storiettes. It was a dull world, a stupid world, a brutal world out here—people should never come to it, he said. What the devil were they all doing anyway? Oh, the world was full of fools! Yet through all this, in spite of his laments, Carnot let his conviction be known that they were living in most historic times, and that even if a doubtful moment loomed up for the finances of his curious little hotel, he would have the compensation of knowing that he had been present in China at a great international turning-point. So at heart quite undaunted he went on boasting, jesting, exaggerating, and ridiculing.

There was something oddly comforting to Kerr in the man's bravado, which was only a peculiar mannerism and a mask to real bravery. He affected to laugh and treat both the affairs of nations and his own affairs with contempt—when the frowning aspect of the capital meant no guests and no money for him. Well, he would live somehow!

"If necessary," he cried, "I will dash into the Palace—seize the old lady who is such a nuisance—and force them to ransom her for a million! What do you think of the idea—it is daring—*hein?*"

Lorenzo had been so busy during the last few hours of his stay that after his momentous interview with his friend he had only been able to say very few words to Kerr. It had been necessary for him to secure the proper diplomatic recording of his phenomenal success—and thus to place beyond the reach of danger his priceless concession. His concession was now his own by Imperial Edict, his very own for fifty years—and that vital fact had to be registered and emblazoned in every possible way. Ministers Plenipotentiary, now that he was going and his good will might be useful, were good enough to tell him that he had scored a greater personal success than any one of them—and each expressed signal willingness to listen to the story of how it had been managed. But Lorenzo did not propose to divulge his methods just

yet; and in the face of such inquiries he became pleasantly vague. It was all too complicated, he said, to be told in a brief conversation. Some day, he explained, he would set forth his methods at length, and then they might see how curious a thing was Chinese diplomacy—which was rather a cruel *riposte* to Envoys Extraordinary duly accredited to an Eastern Court and themselves ostensibly concerned with conducting clever and tortuous negotiations. And thus, buried in strange mystery up to the very end, did Lorenzo make his exit.

From the railway terminus lying so far outside the city walls, however, Kerr received back from him a brief pencilled note on the morning of his departure. The big fat laughing Chinaman, who had welcomed Kerr on his arrival so few months before when he had been so full of hope, was the bearer of this message, digging it out of his pocket just as he dug out the other soiled piece of paper on which had been inscribed Kerr's name.

Lorenzo had hurriedly written:

MY DEAR KERR: The train is about to start, and before shaking off the Peking dust from my boots I should like to thank you once more for your general assistance during our partnership. I will be able to deal with matters in London, I have no doubt, to our mutual satisfaction: in Peking, confine yourself to picking up all the wreckage you can.

A Captain Emm will one day come to see you. You can trust him implicitly. I would warn you that the political situation has had a number of new secret factors introduced. Yesterday's great men have become to-day's nobodies. It is like the stock-markets: you must always follow the rise and fall. Remember that!

Yours truly,

PIETRO LORENZO.

In which characteristic way did Lorenzo make his good-bye. Well, thought Kerr, taking fresh courage since his great idea was admittedly exploded, he would now take advantage of all his practical experience and plunge boldly in to secure the wreckage—as Lorenzo put it. Perhaps he

would be able to forget many things by forcing himself at once to fresh activity. He would see. . . .

It would not have been so bitter for him had not the story of his failure become very soon something of a local *cause célèbre*. Though he was quite certain that Lorenzo had never spoken a word, somehow a garbled version of how he had been beaten when within an ace of succeeding became the constant subject of diplomatic whispers. The two men who belonged to the place and who had been present at Mrs. Hopeful's séance had been eagerly questioned as to what had really taken place—and they had as good as admitted that anything may have occurred. The clash of the iron lid of the despatch-box, because it had taken place in the dark, had been easily turned into a revolver-shot by people who preferred fiction to fact; and it was now boldly said by some that Kerr, hearing that he was being rifled during the alleged spirit-rapping, had actually fired in the direction of the sound and that a lady had been shot in the arm! A general *mêlée* had immediately ensued, in which several had played a very inglorious part. Carnot had finally ended the tragedy by breaking open the doors, and with the aid of his servants had forced every one to capitulate and be tied up pending an unofficial inquiry!

Such was the story, Kerr was assured, which was being circulated, with variations to suit various tastes. People desired something surprising, something sensational, something unheard of—something to fit the times and the lowering political horizon—and they got it! De Boyar, seeing how things were going, gradually and discreetly made it one of his best stories. He had first one revolver-shot—then two—then plenty of revolver-shots! It had been a little battle *à l'americaine,* he said. Lorenzo had flung himself on Mr. Smith and nearly choked that polite gentleman to death; Mrs. Hopeful in her excitement had bitten the Spaniard in the leg—so badly that they had to carry him home on a stretcher; everybody had done something wonderful whilst

they were in the hypnotic state; he could not venture to say what he had done! And then when he was alone with Baroness Waffen he added all sorts of other details of a more intimate nature which made Baroness Waffen shake with laughter. De Boyar was really irrepressible.

It was very hard for Kerr to face all this, but he managed to preserve an indifferent attitude, and never to give any one the chance to question him. He remembered incessantly just then the caustic reflection of a former tutor of his—that most moderns unite a roving sensuality with a keen business instinct. It was a saying worth remembering.

What stung him worst of all was to hear one day the young *attaché* who had gone to the Great Wall with them saying that he had been fooled by a woman—in the most open way possible. Yes, it was quite true, he had been fooled with his eyes open. Yet even now when he closed his eyes he still felt the strange charm which Madame Boisragon's coldness had for him, and he could still believe that he would succumb as easily again.

What was it, he wondered, going over many scenes once more. She had been reticent even in moments of passion—she had always seemed far away from him—cold, oh yes, cold. Perhaps it was that—yet who really liked to clasp marble? It was a pure viciousness on his part—one of those obsessions called into being by the interplay of conflicting personalities. Only when, mad with rage, he had been ready to strike her savagely, had she begun to melt and show the real woman. What might not he have learnt had Lorenzo not intervened! She might have spoken to him truly—told him things that had always puzzled him. What had her motives been from the beginning—why had she really done what she had done? That part seemed stranger to him than his own actions. It was he in any case who was responsible—she had held back, had tried to hold him at arm's length. Oh, yes, he was sure of that. And now, in spite of everything that had happened, he missed her. And that perhaps was the bitterest confession of all.

A hundred times he went over his last scene with her, dwelling on his violence with a wondering brain. Blows—how foolish they really were—they were nothing but attempted short-cuts back to lost roads! If a man in anger could realize that! For just as the traveller, filled with anger at the puzzling gloom around him, darts rapidly off here and there, searching in vain for the good way which has so mysteriously disappeared, only to involve himself inevitably in some fresh predicament, so does the man who proposes to act as he proposed to act plunge himself in greater distress. That is what Lorenzo evidently most clearly understood. Yes—he was sure of it.

He had frequently marvelled in secret at Lorenzo's attitude towards him—Lorenzo, that mediæval-minded yet philosophic man. Now that Lorenzo was gone and it might be a long time before they met again, Kerr began to appreciate a side of his character to which he had previously given scant attention. Lorenzo had been singularly discreet—he had always remained in the background, watchful, suspicious, a little cynical, but never overstepping certain definite bounds which he had evidently set himself. It was not his business to advise a fully-grown man—he had warned him in his own curious way; and circumstances had only too clearly proved that he had been quite right in all his assumptions.

As the weeks went by and the man became only a memory, Lorenzo assumed his true proportions. To Peter Kerr, used mainly to conventional types of men—Englishmen who were just good or bad or indifferent in a very stereotyped way—Lorenzo soon became an extraordinary man, exemplifying what has been frequently said of the Italians—that they are the cleverest people in Europe. He was so supple and yet so devoted to the pursuit of true strategy—that is, following a definite line with all possible ardour. That was the Napoleonic principle, as well as the triumphant principle in all walks of life. And the apotheosis of Lorenzo was his concession—a concession covering an area able to supply the

whole world with coal and iron for centuries, it was said. With his eight thousand pounds and his ingenuity Lorenzo had done that. How trivial appeared all the others beside this man!

Peter Kerr had ample time to reflect on all these things as he sat alone—and reflect he did, with a persistence which never flagged.

CHAPTER II

"Entre tard et trop tard, il y a, par la grâce de Dieu, une distance incommensurable."—MME. SWETCHINE.

THE blue-coated *boy* brought in the card to Kerr in his usual nonchalant way, as if nothing in the world ever surprised or interested him, as if even to take these few steps to his master was a bore. Kerr read the card which was handed him with a curious thrill of interest. On it was printed in great ungainly Gothic lettering, bespeaking eloquently the limitations of Eastern printing-offices, just this:

CAPTAIN EMM.

There was nothing below the name to show whether Captain Emm was white or yellow; whether he was the commander of a coasting-vessel or of a squadron of cavalry; whether he resided in China or in Timbuctoo. That copious data, to which temporary residence in a diplomatic centre had already accustomed Kerr on such a reputed credential as a visiting-card, was totally lacking. Who was Captain Emm?

"Show him up," said Kerr after a moment's reflection. The *boy* retired, closed the door behind him, and immediately reopened it with a sudden jerk, which sent a gust of wind across the room. Captain Emm, doubtless acting on strategic principles—or perhaps prompted by the lazy servant—had evidently followed his card upstairs. Indeed, whilst Kerr was deliberating he must have been just outside the door. Now, with a preliminary cough, he quickly entered the room. His step was firm and somehow carried instant conviction.

"Good-morning," he said briefly in a monotonous, colour-

less voice, shaking hands with decision and vigour. "Yes, I will sit down, certainly. Thank you."

He bestowed himself on a chair with stiff precision.

Kerr, whilst they exchanged a few preliminary remarks, studied him closely and wondered who he really was. In aspect, without being remarkable he was somewhat singular. He was a lean, loosely-knit man of more than the average height—perhaps forty years old. He was neatly dressed in a rather foreign way; the hat in his hand was old but carefully brushed; and finally he was the possessor of a big, bronzed face curiously resembling that of a horse. A heavy moustache hid his mouth; his hair was a little grizzly at the temples; his nose was long and decisive; and he frequently cleared his throat as if it were a constant source of trouble to him. He immediately intimated that he would neither smoke nor drink—evidently for these lax latitudes he was singularly abstemious. His small twinkling eyes appeared to contemplate the world from over his big moustache with curious unemotion.

"Mr. Lorenzo asked me to come and see you," he said finally. "If there is anything I can do for you, I shall be most happy." He stopped speaking just as he had begun—that is, as if he were a rusty machine-gun which fired off a few rounds reluctantly and then jammed.

"You are very kind," replied Kerr. "I shall certainly take advantage of your offer if I can. I suppose you have known Lorenzo for a long time."

"For two weeks."

"Oh," said Kerr, somewhat surprised and secretly tickled at his visitor's brief answer. "I thought you were an old friend from what Lorenzo told me."

Captain Emm hesitated a moment, as if any answer might be indiscreet.

"I know Mr. Lorenzo very well," he said at length.

"Really," continued Kerr, "then you have probably had business relations with him."

The ghost of a smile suddenly emerged for a moment from

behind the cover of the big moustache and as quickly disappeared. The reflection must have been decidedly humorous, for the little eyes twinkled very fast until the mouth suddenly bade them be quiet.

"It was business," said this singular man finally, as if he were stating an irrelevant fact. Kerr did not take his eyes off his face.

"Well, you were dealing with a master in the art of Oriental business. There was little Lorenzo did not know," he commented.

"He was very clever, certainly," said his visitor.

It was now clear that Captain Emm was of an uncommunicative type. Evidently he did not propose to disclose anything of his relations with the Italian, whatever they may have been. So Kerr shifted his ground and began the attack from another quarter.

"You don't live in Peking, of course," he inquired.

"No," said his visitor with decided emphasis. "Oh, no, I live in the country."

Kerr wondered what sort of men lived the country life in China apart from missionaries, but he carefully refrained from asking. Doubtlessly Carnot could tell him. Anyway Lorenzo had said that this man was an ally: and Lorenzo, when he was really serious, always spoke the absolute truth, so there was no reason to be on his guard.

"Will you be long in Peking this time?" he asked.

"Perhaps for several hours—perhaps for several weeks."

Kerr began to see light.

"I understand," he said. "You await orders, and when you get them you may have to jump for it to reach your destination."

"Exactly," said Captain Emm gravely.

"Well, if I could only be sure of seeing you again, I might begin by telling you some of my difficulties and asking your help."

"You can see me very easily as long as I am here," said Captain Emm.

"I am glad of that," remarked his host. "Where are you staying?"

Captain Emm bent forward and coughed several times and at last pointed a finger at the wall.

"A few inches of lath and plaster only separate us; I have the very next room to yours," he said briefly, when he had mastered his recalcitrant throat.

Kerr could hardly refrain from laughing.

"That is rather funny," he remarked, "if one sees it in the right way."

The horselike face relented a little and looked on the world less mournfully.

"It is convenient at least if we wish to see each other," he said.

"What I really want to know," began Kerr again, attempting to get interested, and lighting a cigarette, "is whom can one trust in this town? If I could only know that I should feel somewhat happier."

Captain Emm looked surprised—almost grieved, in fact, by this inquiry.

"No one can be trusted," he answered quite cheerfully.

For the second time Kerr laughed. Instead of depressing him, this matter-of-fact attitude was somehow eminently reassuring.

"But then it is rather hopeless work trying to do anything," he protested. "In a quagmire one can only go under."

"It is hopeless work," admitted Captain Emm gravely, not noticing the metaphor. "But though it is in a way hopeless, it is still possible to accomplish results—big results. Look what Mr. Lorenzo did. When he came to China he had not a single friend: when he left, a dozen men were ready to do his bidding. And a hundred more were waiting to be tempted!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Kerr. He was encouraged. Captain Emm had made the longest speech during his visit on an impersonal issue: he would follow it up.

"Well, what do you advise in my case? I suppose you have heard all about my business?"

"Yes," said Captain Emm. "I know all details, I think."

He pondered a bit and cleared his throat.

"Have you a map," he asked, "a plain, large-scale map of north China?"

"Yes," said Kerr, producing one.

Captain Emm took it in his hands, studied it for a while, and then began speaking.

"The Manchus are the only people of importance in this country," he announced. If his manner had not been so simple his words would have sounded bombastic. "The others——" He snapped his fingers in unemotional contempt. "Try to secure railways convenient for the use of the Manchus—railways which they could use if necessity compelled them. Look—here and here and here." He marked out with his strong fingers imaginary lines, leading apparently from Peking towards the vast western provinces and the deserts of Central Asia.

Kerr gazed at him in open surprise; Captain Emm as an expert railway adviser seemed rather odd.

"But," he objected, "that is all very well. What you say may be politically sound, still those lines are commercially valueless. It would not pay to construct them. It would pay neither the Chinese nor the contractors."

Captain Emm laughed a short, dry laugh.

"What do you care?" he said. "What you want first is that your name should become known to the Court; then the rest will follow. You must interest the only people who count in the country."

Kerr reflected as he studied the map.

"Nobody has even made a rough survey in the regions you suggest," he replied, though he wanted to say that he had spent a good deal of money attempting to interest a very big Manchu.

Captain Emm shrugged his shoulders.

"Send some one to ride through them," he said. "They

know nothing in the Palace about costs. Make a rough estimate and interest them. It is the only way."

Kerr decided to conciliate him. This man had his own ideas. Later he most certainly could be made of use.

"It is certainly worth thinking over," he rejoined diplomatically. "I will look into the matter—to-morrow at the latest. Now there is another question I should like to ask you. Do you know anything about this Prince?"

He mentioned the name of the dignitary with whom he had had such eventful dealings, and tried to discover from his visitor's face what he really thought of him.

"He is corrupt—very corrupt—everybody bribes him," said Captain Emm gravely. "How much have you paid him?"

Kerr, though he was somewhat taken aback at the directness with which Captain Emm went to the point, calmly consulted a note-book.

"About eight thousand pounds," he answered.

Captain Emm immediately whistled in a droll sort of way, as if his lips had been scalded. He did it too somewhat mechanically and unmusically, as if his lips had no real relationship to his face or his body; it was just a little private escapade on their part which he was powerless to prevent.

"That is far too much," he said at length. "Eight thousand pounds out here has the purchasing-power of eighty thousand in England. Did you know that?"

He seemed to be thrown into melancholy at the idea of such waste; for he studied the wall lugubriously for some time before speaking again. Kerr left him with his thoughts.

"What is the Prince doing for you now?" he inquired finally.

"Nothing."

"Nothing! The rascal! Have you tried frightening him?"

"No," said Kerr. "I have certainly not tried that yet."

Captain Emm cleared his throat and his eyes twinkled rapidly.

"Frighten him," he said, "be rude. Hammer the table."

"Supposing that is no use?" replied Kerr, smiling at the scene which these words conjured up.

"Frighten him more. Be more rude. Hammer the table more."

"And then?"

"After that ask me again," said Captain Emm cautiously. "I will give you an address: if I am not here you can write to me and get an answer in twenty-four hours. I would like to see that experiment tried."

He rose abruptly and put out his hand. When he was gone Kerr did not know whether to laugh or feel annoyed. Captain Emm had certainly shaken him up. He was a new type—also a tonic from the mere fact that he was an original who cared only for his own line of argument and did not seem to understand anything else.

That was their first meeting. The second occurred that very evening at eleven o'clock. At that hour Kerr, who was going to his rooms, found Captain Emm writing at a table close to his open door. Consequently Kerr paused to say good-evening: Captain Emm promptly begged him to enter. Captain Emm seemed infinitely more affable now that his strangeness had worn off. His little eyes were twinkling fast and his whole body looked relaxed.

"I heard a good story to-day," he said as soon as Kerr was seated. "I think I will tell it to you. It will help you to understand something of the methods of this country."

He began clearing his throat. Kerr sank into a chair and hid his mouth behind a cloth cap he had in his hand. Captain Emm in the rôle of a story-teller should be very good, for he certainly would have something original or quaint to relate.

"I shall be very pleased to hear it," he remarked.

Captain Emm busied himself first in neatly packing up his writing. When he had finished, he placed his papers in a portfolio, which he locked. He then rose, and opening a

battered trunk, put the portfolio inside, and once again used his keys. After that he threw a travelling-rug over the trunk and arranged some spare boots on top. It was all done with a method and an amount of attention curiously comical. Kerr was glad he had his cloth cap conveniently near his mouth. This man was certainly utterly unlike those he had met hitherto.

Captain Emm, being now reasonably satisfied regarding the security of his papers, came back to his seat and squared his shoulders.

"This is a good story," he announced abruptly, "though it may surprise you. One of the chief things in China, however, is never to be surprised—not even if the sky falls down and you have to hold it up with your hands."

After which curious pronouncement Captain Emm smiled to himself in satisfaction and began. He spoke exactly as if he were reciting a lesson learnt by heart.

"In the town of Nao-ning-fu there lived the other day a rich old Chinaman of seventy. He was a widower, his wife having died many years before. He had one son, who was engaged in business in a distant province, having bitterly quarrelled with his father over money matters. During the son's absence the old man had finally taken the advice of his friends and married a young wife, hoping to have other children. Several years passed, however, and his hopes were not realized. So accordingly, feeling that he was becoming very old, he at length sent for the prodigal and effected a reconciliation with him. Family custom and ancestor-worship demanded that the son should be available when he was carried to the tomb, or else disgrace would come. So the son lived peacefully in his father's house until the day came when his father died.

"It so happened that the old man's death was most opportune. Very few months went by before the young widow gave birth to a child, and the scandal in the town of Nao-ning-fu was very great. There was indeed no other topic of conversation. Not only would the large family posses-

sions be forfeited to distant relatives if it could be proved that the old man was not the father of this child, but what is more, the young widow and the presumptive father—the son who had returned home a year before—would be guilty of one of the greatest Chinese crimes, and instant strangulation would be their reward.

"Well, it was not long before trouble began. A host of relatives of the old man, cousins, half-brothers, aunts, uncles, and many others, speedily took action. A great deputation proceeded to the magistrate's Yamên and swore that an incestuous act had been committed. They demanded that not only should the widow and young man be rewarded with strangulation for their sin, but, what was more to the point, the property should be divided amongst them equally, since direct succession had failed. So important was the affair that the governor of the city speedily took the matter into his hands, and the young widow and the son were promptly seized and flung into prison pending their formal trial.

"Fortunately for himself, the son had been given timely warning of what was coming; and before his arrest, speeding to one of the most celebrated *literati* of the city, he had implored his assistance. For twenty thousand taels, paid to him in advance in shoes of silver, the learned man promised to find a complete rebuttal to the chain of circumstantial evidence which would be brought forward: the only thing he enjoined on the guilty couple was complete and absolute silence until they heard from him. They must remain as silent as the tomb, even under torture. He would supply the defence in due course. So no sooner had the prison received the son and his paramour than the learned man set to work.

"First, by means of secret inquiries, he discovered exactly who could gain access to the young widow's house during the lifetime of the old man without exciting suspicion. He found that only one class of men ever entered the women's courtyards—washmen carrying home the wash. Even the

water-coolies did not go to those courtyards. So forthwith he went to every washing establishment in the city, seeking for men with some marked peculiarity. For a long time his search was fruitless, but at length, when he almost despaired of success, fortune favoured him. He found a youth whose left hand had all the fingers missing. They had been crushed in some accident in a wheat-grinding shop when he was a young boy. For a few taels the learned man duly arranged his co-operation, and a few more taels secured that an important message should be carried by the gaolers into the prison.

"The day of trial duly arrived, and a host of witnesses, drawn from the ranks of the needy relatives, deposed all manner of lies. It was clear, they said, how matters had gone: every one was aware of it. They entered into the most private details with whole-hearted zest—details which it is unnecessary here to mention. The young son absolutely denied all these stories, and even torture failed to break down his stoicism. Convinced at length that nothing could be learnt from him, the magistrates ordered him to be removed. Then the young widow was brought in.

"Though she was the colour of death, neither did this young woman's self-possession desert her in this great crisis: she affirmed unfalteringly the complete innocence of her stepson. Pressed by the magistrates to account for the phenomenon of her giving birth to a child when years of cohabitation with her old husband had proved the impossibility of his becoming a father, she at length gave way and said that, though shame suffocated her, she would tell the truth.

"This was her story.

"She said that one summer evening nearly a year before, when it was becoming dusk, a young man had brought in washing from the city. He had talked to her for some time, and at length, yielding to her feelings, she had abandoned herself for a few minutes to his embraces. Terrified the next day with the possibility of her guilt being discovered, she had taken good care never again to see the youth. She

could give no description of his appearance, as it had been almost dark: only she knew that as she clasped his hands when he was going, she had discovered that his left hand was mutilated, the fingers being missing.

"This remarkable story, though entirely disbelieved, produced a most profound impression in the magistrates' court. It was so unexpected that no one knew what to reply. The relatives raised a storm of protests: then they laughed at the tale. It was invented, they said.

"The magistrates, however, to forward the interests of justice, had to order a search to be made in all the wash-houses of the city to discover if there was a youth answering the description which had been given. At the end of two or three days the Yamên runners discovered that a young man with his left hand mutilated had actually gone into hiding a short time before. The magistrates' scepticism was turned into astonishment: they ordered the immediate discovery and arrest of the youth. He was at length tracked down and brought to the court; and though at first he denied it, when he had been knelt on chains and vigorously bambooed to assist his memory, his story was found to coincide exactly with what the widow had said. He pleaded complete immunity from punishment; for he said that when he had delivered the washing, the unknown woman, whom he had taken for a domestic slave, had forced him to his rash act, and he was therefore innocent.

"In spite of the relatives' protests, in the face of this evidence nothing remained but to discharge the guilty pair. The son soon sold most of the property and the couple disappeared, and to-day, two years after these events, the true story has come out."

Captain Emm finished as precisely as he had begun. He uncrossed his legs, rose, went to the bell, and rang for something to drink.

"That is a most remarkable story," commented Kerr, who had been thoroughly interested. "Is it really true? It is indeed one of the most remarkable stories I ever heard."

"I am sure it is true," said Captain Emm. He hesitated a moment and looked almost abashed. "It is so true," he ended, "that I had interested myself in writing it down."

"Oh-ho," exclaimed Kerr laughingly, "I had no idea you were an author."

An immense change came over Captain Emm. He looked almost frightened and his little eyes blinked fast.

"An author!" he exclaimed. "What are you saying? Never say such a thing to anybody. Never, please! I only write for my own amusement—to practise my English. I should be ruined if people thought I were an author. Oh, yes, ruined!"

So great was his concern that he ceased being comical—he was really frightened.

"I should not dream of telling anybody," said Kerr reassuringly. "But frankly, I do not exactly see why you should not write if it pleases you."

Captain Emm appeared a little reassured.

"An officer," he announced in his old manner, "should never write: it excites suspicion."

Then he gave Kerr his whisky, and drank a little soda-water himself.

"It is time to sleep," he announced, looking at his watch.

"Good-night," said Kerr, beginning to walk away.

But suddenly Captain Emm began to cough violently in a most curious way. Involuntarily Kerr turned, and as he caught sight of his companion he was overcome with amazement.

Captain Emm's horselike face was now crimson-red—so red, in fact, that his features looked swollen and convulsed. The big moustache, instead of being spread reposefully and solemnly across his cheeks, had become agitated, alarmed—was unwittingly expressing by its fierce disarray a world of troubled meaning.

"Drink some water," suggested Kerr from the door.

But his companion, in spite of his distress, stolidly shook

his head. Though he carefully kept his lips compressed and his cheeks absurdly blown out as if he were going to explode, it was plain that he had already control of himself. Now, with a resolute movement, he suddenly wheeled as if on parade, and marching to a chest of drawers he abruptly took therefrom a bundle of papers tied with blue ribbon. A feeling of apprehension smote Kerr as this strange man approached him; but he did not stir an inch or speak a word.

"I am doing a questionable act," began Captain Emm, now speaking with all his customary lugubriousness, "but I have thought over the matter well and believe that I am right. I must first explain that noticing this afternoon that I had not in my room a piece of furniture to which I am entitled —a chest of drawers—I went across the hall to the empty room which is on the same verandah as yours." For an almost imperceptible moment Captain Emm paused to bestow a look on Kerr's iron calm. "That chest of drawers happened to be in there, so I ordered it to be brought to my room. This evening I discovered that one of the lower drawers was locked and that the key was nowhere to be found. Fortunately, before I had called a servant, I remembered that we are in a land where carpenters are lazy. I was almost certain that in this piece of native-made furniture there would be no such thing as a wooden division between each layer of drawers. So I merely pulled out the drawer immediately above the one that was locked, put down my hand, and caught hold of these." Captain Emm stopped and awkwardly held up the bundle as if it were a lighted torch. Then he went on: "The top one happens to be yours, so I did not read it. The other letters mostly come from Brussels and were addressed to the lady." Once more he became red and his cough was with difficulty controlled. "I have only glanced at them, but I have seen enough to know that they are full of business which concerns you most intimately. Now, good-night."

Before Kerr could utter a word, Captain Emm had roughly

thrust the packet into his hands and as roughly closed and locked his door.

In his own room Kerr threw himself into a chair and sat transfixed as he gradually understood the purport of this strange discovery. For the whole thing was clear now—as clear as it would ever be. The miserable fiasco in which he had been the central figure stood explained, and he saw down long winding avenues which led to nowhere save to dismal morasses. Fear, cupidity, jealousy, passion—each had evidently played its part with Madame Boisragon. Under her cold exterior a problem highly complicated in its nature had been slowly and silently worked out because—because he was not like Lorenzo, a man who saw danger when he was scheming in the very barking of every stray dog. This woman whom he had almost loved had even taken away that curious little letter of Phyllis May's—and hidden it. And all these many other letters from Brussels, always signed by the same man Maes? His was evidently the master-hand—yes, as even the husband referred to him respectfully as Colonel Maes. . . . And now Peter Kerr gave way to fierce laughter as he understood the rôle Mrs. John West had played—Mrs. John West, whose existence he had almost forgotten! Listen to what she said about him—who would have thought it? Well, what did it matter now—what did anything matter? He passed his hand over his eyes and thought. That was the worst part now—the thought that this cold Madame Boisragon had loved him to order. That was the worst part—it entered like iron into his soul. Yet it was true; it was undoubtedly true. He remembered once more how curious had been her attitude towards him from the beginning—how something had seemed to sway her first one way and then another—how she had repulsed him only to surrender herself. Of course it was very clear now—everything was clear.

He gazed at the ceiling and suddenly recollected with astonishment that he had no right, no business to be reading

these letters. It was only making matters worse. A flush suffused his face and he abruptly arose. Lorenzo was right once more—an old pack of cards is only fit to be thrown away—especially when they are marked. Now resolutely he tied up the letters before he had begun to exhaust their many meanings, and thrusting them into a drawer, he prepared to sleep. To-morrow he would burn them; for what was the use of reopening a tragic book across which the finger of Fate had written Finis?

Yet that night, because the very best resolutions, like all other resolutions, are very fluid and ethereal things that float up into the air like tiny cloud-puffs and are quickly dissolved, he did not really sleep. All night long a phantasmagoria in which Madame Boisragon, Mrs. John West, and Phyllis May, led by the unknown Belgian Colonel, formed a confused and hateful medley, stood dancing endlessly before him in high glee and torturing him in a hundred ways.

And behind this phantasmagoria—dominating it, towering over it, yet mournfully surveying it in high embarrassment because of his simple nature, stood a Gargantuan Captain Emm—a Gargantuan creature telling him strange stories in a hoarse whisper under cover of a vast and formidable moustache; and—strangest thing of all—showing him with his cough just how to read the moral!

CHAPTER III

"Jugez un homme par ses questions, plutôt que par ses réponses."—*French Proverb.*

In olden times in Europe the house of every important man was truly his castle. There was therefore considerable difficulty in entering such abodes—if the owner did not happen to be in the mood for receiving visitors. For even supposing there were no drawbridges (as there never were, save in the country), there existed other impediments, such as rude serving-folk and possibly hounds on chains. These served to give endless possibilities to the amenities which might ensue if strangers tried to force their presence on the master of the house. Modern conditions, however, have entirely removed all such picturesque features, and now Europe in the main merely consists of masses of individuals duly guarded by policemen.

In China, however, even to-day the residence of the big man is still his castle. The formidable nature of his compound-walls, which are always two or three feet thick and often fifteen feet high, makes them capable of sustaining an arduous siege; his servants are numbered by the dozen if not by the hundred; the gate-house is always a veritable blockhouse, and the gatemen blockheads thoroughly drilled in the gentle art of blockading undesired visitors. Also it has to be noted that a curious system of intelligence passes word from the dwelling-house to the gate-house keepers (who have their brothers and their wives' brothers and other people's brothers to assist them) and allows these guardians always to know just who may be included in the category of *personæ grata* and who not. Yesterday's greatest friends can very easily become during the night to-day's enemies—and the gate-keepers know it; whilst the man whom they

literally spurned away at one moment with most fatuous excuses may be suddenly most affably received. The China gate-house, to perform such manifold duties, is provided with various kinds of record-books, in which are recorded all possible details. Thus visitors' names are always entered; lists are kept of letters received and letters sent; and there are also odd memoranda-books in which are entered many curious sums, large and small—not to speak of other things.

Thus this important adjunct to the great man's establishment becomes virtually his clearing-house, saving him from endless trouble. The head gate-keeper, the responsible man, being so important inevitably has official rank and is a person to be considered. No back doors enter a compound—no matter what number of private entrances there may be inside—and the outer gate-house, which is so closely guarded, always has first to be passed before the freedom of the compound is accorded to any one. All day long, under the watchful eyes of the gate-keepers, a ceaseless stream of people pass in and out, beginning with humble and hard-working water-coolies, who carry water from the wells as soon as pale dawn has come, and ending perhaps with the passage of Ministers of State or Imperial eunuchs, who twist between their supple fingers the destinies of provinces. This sub-science of Oriental life, though somewhat puzzling, is very necessary to understand if you would gain the true perspective, and it is therefore only proper that it should be here explained.

Kerr, having reflected for several days on what his strange new acquaintance, Captain Emm, had told him, and having ascertained that all political matters were virtually at a standstill in the capital owing to the dramatic *coup d'état* of the old Empress Dowager, deemed the time propitious for attempting the rough experiment which had been suggested. He determined that he would see the Prince that very day—at least, he would make a vigorous attempt to see him. He was fortified in his resolve by a piece of paper Captain Emm had given him—the morning after he had regaled him

with the strange story of Chinese connubial felicity. On this bit of paper were merely written a few Chinese characters; yet Captain Emm had told him that, put in a plain envelope and tightly sealed, this talisman must have at once a most beneficent effect on the Prince.

Accordingly, having duly made up his mind, Kerr merely summoned his two interpreters and informed them that at two o'clock that day he would call on the Prince. The interpreters suggested that the proper course would be to send some one first to ascertain if such an interview would be convenient: they were astonished to find that their proposal was quickly brushed aside by their employer, who curtly told them that their duty was merely to obey and not to advise.

Two o'clock, therefore, found the little party once more at the Prince's gates. The interpreters, carrying out the instructions which had been carefully given them, proceeded to the gate-house with their master's English and Chinese cards, and nothing more. Kerr remained sitting in his cart, smoking a cigarette and trying to look dignified and unconcerned in spite of the crowd of curious faces, furnished with gimlet eyes, which quickly surrounded him.

He was not very much disappointed when after a quarter of an hour's delay the interpreters returned, and said that the Prince regretted deeply that as he was suffering severely from sickness, he must postpone the pleasure of seeing his distinguished caller. They had sent in two messages through the gate-keepers, they said—the same answer had come each time. As if to show how futile was this flowery excuse, half a dozen personages in official clothes just then came out, and jumping into their carts, drove off hurriedly.

"The doctors, I suppose," remarked Kerr caustically, pointing to these departures. The interpreters in spite of themselves broke into nervous smiles. They did not like the new spirit of independence which infected their employer; and not understanding to what it was due, they suspected that something was going to surprise them. It was.

Kerr was meanwhile searching in his pocket. The crowd

of busybodies, now vastly swelled in numbers, almost tumbled over one another in their anxiety to know what possibly could be in that pocket. Kerr, though he had the envelope between his fingers, purposely kept a long while searching. He believed he had the situation well in hand now, and he was enjoying himself. The interpreters' anxiety had become unbounded, and it was very diverting to him to observe it.

At length the hand brought forth the secret. It was merely an envelope—a big envelope, purposely selected on account of its size, and heavily sealed.

Kerr spoke slowly.

"You will take this envelope," he said, "and hand it to the gate-keeper. The gate-keeper is to deliver it at once to the Prince and is then to return with any message there may be. Do you understand? Nothing more."

The senior of the two interpreters received the cover and his supple fingers passed like lightning up and down the white paper. What was in it? Could it be money? If so, this method was a little too brutal even for——

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said in his perfect English, "but I would like to remark——"

"Nothing, if you are well advised," interruped Kerr with sudden roughness. "You have your orders: execute them and make no remarks at all."

The two men went off again, talking rapidly to each other. They were devoured by curiosity. What may have happened inside the Prince's residence was never known to Kerr; but after not more than ten minutes the interpreters suddenly returned. A new respect had crept into the manner of the two men—the respect which is accorded by all Orientals to unexpected success.

"The Prince says that he will do himself the honour of making the effort of seeing you. Please come."

"With the greatest alacrity and good feeling," Kerr replied.

He jumped to the ground so hastily that the bystanders fell back on one another, as if to escape any possible chastise-

ment for their bad manners. Kerr, however, did not even see them now. He threw away his cigarette and addressed a last remark to his own men.

"If you ever have to call on a Prince with a bad sickness," he said, smiling amiably, since he had won his point, "always be sure to have a headache powder in your pocket."

And with that parting shot he left them to cudgel their brains during the whole of the interview regarding what that envelope could really have contained.

The Prince undoubtedly must have been a trifle unwell—in a physical as well as a political sense—for he looked pale and worried, and his politeness was not sufficient to keep him as interested as he should have been.

"Did this gentleman ever discover how his papers were robbed?" he began, seeking to undermine the new assurance which he speedily discovered in Kerr's manner by bringing up the most disagreeable subject he could think of.

"No," answered the interpreters after a look from Kerr.

"It was singularly unfortunate," said the Prince, a trifle nervously now. His visitor remained so calm and indifferent that he did not like the outlook, especially as the little scrap of paper had said that he was a friend of a new great man who had arisen.

"Singularly unfortunate," acquiesced Kerr, readily enough.

"It should never have happened," continued the Prince.

"Undoubtedly you are right," confessed Kerr.

"I have never heard of such a thing before," said his distinguished host.

"It is very rare," admitted the caller once more.

The Prince was transparently glad when his servants, to the number of some half-dozen or more, just then entered with tea and cakes and cigarettes, as well as some sweet champagne in a bottle adorned with a label made for this particular market. As the glasses looked even more unappetizing than the doubtful bottle of champagne, Kerr took the green tea which was pressed on him, and scalded his lips.

This interview was somehow much more interesting than the others had been. He was now his own general—and he liked the idea.

"The weather is becoming delicious," he remarked, somewhat after the manner of the grammar-book.

The Prince assented and then continued.

"Did you not feel tempted to go away when assailed by the violent and unhealthy heat of summer?" he inquired.

Kerr scalded his lips once more in his determination not to show even the trace of a smile. Yet the thrust was so prettily made that it was almost a sin not to applaud it. However, he must be firm.

"No, I did not," he answered abruptly. Then he went on.

"The English," he remarked sententiously, "are known all over the world for their roughness of manner and tenacity of purpose. They are slow and somewhat stupid compared with other peoples; but when they grip a thing, they hold on."

The interpreters had some difficulty, as they translated, in keeping a frown from the Prince's face. Openly he did not relish an allusion to a past which he would have liked to be considered dead, buried, and forgotten. However, he was a passed master in the art of diplomatic thrust and counter-thrust; and so now, pressing his beautifully shaped hands together, he suddenly accepted the situation and philosophically smiled.

"I do not think the English are slow and stupid when their interests are concerned," he replied.

"Really?" said Kerr, as if he were falling into a trap and allowing himself to be gently turned from a set purpose.

The Prince continued:

"The English understand commerce very well. No stupid people understand trade: at least they lose money. Therefore the English, since they make money, cannot be stupid."

Kerr set down his delicate porcelain cup suddenly, and with that movement his whole manner changed. Now was the time.

"You are right," he said with extraordinary earnestness. "The English cannot lose money—they will not lose money without a fight. I am glad you understand. They cannot lose money."

Bang, bang, bang! He brought his fist down so heavily three times on the Canton blackwood table at his side that his tea-cup jumped. And as the tea-cup jumped so did the Prince jump and the interpreters jump. It was delightful. He was reverting to the historic methods of Sir Harry Parkes and becoming a mere table-thumper as necessity demanded.

"Oh!" said the Prince, sitting forward on the edge of his chair.

"Oh, oh!" echoed the interpreters involuntarily, as if they were interpreting.

Kerr bit his lips with such force that he himself started. Captain Emm's medicine, after the headache powder, was a splendid tonic evidently.

"Yes," he continued aloud. "I am like my countrymen: I cannot lose money."

"That is so, that is so," assented the Prince somewhat hurriedly, carefully watching his visitor's hands. "That is common sense which every one understands."

"I am glad every one understands," said Kerr.

The interpreters looked at each other in doubt and then at Kerr. They had not translated this last remark. The Prince was looking at them inquiringly.

"Tell the Prince," repeated Kerr sternly, "that I am glad every one understands."

It was so pointed that even the Prince's pale and aristocratic face showed traces of sudden colour; and as that colour receded matters took on a new aspect.

"What new plans has this gentleman?" asked the Prince in a businesslike voice. Diplomacy was plainly at an end: neither thrust nor counter-thrust had been of any use. It was time to be plain.

Kerr smiled gently and put his hands into his coat-pockets. He would hammer the table no more, if things were going as smoothly as this. Also he would like the Prince to know it.

"It is imperative for the Prince to understand certain plain facts," he said aloud. "I have spent more than twenty thousand pounds in China and have had nothing in return. My costs must be recovered somehow, or else I cannot return home."

"Twenty thousand pounds," said the Prince, looking puzzled; "where have you spent so much money?"

It was audacious of him, and Kerr appreciated it. The dignitary was determined to find out, if possible, the names of the others who had profited in the same way as himself. But Kerr had no intention of obliging him.

"It is unimportant," replied Kerr meaningly. "I have all details carefully entered, and my cheque-book affords clear proof."

"Oh!" said the Prince blandly. "Now let us talk business."

They did talk business—clearly and straight to the point for one hour without interruption; and when Kerr got up to go, he felt convinced that the Prince and he understood each other as they never had before. They came to a hard-and-fast arrangement which could not fail to be profitable to both of them; for with the question of commissions definitely arranged, there would be no more bungling.

The gate-house reflected these sentiments as Kerr handed out some dollar-notes for distribution. Peace and good will had come. . . .

Kerr did not see Captain Emm again until that evening, when he was sitting as usual at his little table writing.

"Well?" said Captain Emm inquiringly, stopping his work for a few minutes.

"I have to thank you for a lot," replied Kerr, laughingly

telling him of his experiences. Captain Emm listened to it all very gravely, though once or twice the horse-face relaxed and the little eyes twinkled fast.

"Good," he said finally; "I am very pleased."

"I don't like to ask questions," ventured Kerr as he was leaving, "but I *am* curious about what may have been written on that little piece of paper you gave me."

Captain Emm hesitated and then spoke.

"I can tell you," he said, "but only in a certain way. On that paper was written that you are a friend of the man who may become dictator of China."

Kerr was wise enough not to ask the name of this personage: doubtless he would be able to learn that later.

This indeed was the land of mystery and intrigue, thought he, as he peacefully fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

"Il en est du véritable amour comme de l'apparition des esprits: tout le monde en parle, mais peu de gens en ont vu."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

THE autumn day had been beautiful beyond words. Not a cloud was in the sky—not a breath of ill-conditioned wind disturbed the perfect serenity of satisfied nature. The hills and mountains of Mongolia seemed to have suddenly come many miles nearer; for in that clear atmosphere distances were annihilated and the eye seemed capable of piercing endless space. So like dry champagne was the air, too, that all living things suddenly acquired a new zest for living, which they showed in their joyous movements. Ponies and mules, hauling at their hempen traces, whenever their drivers brought them to a halt on the rutted highway, now playfully bit at one another and reared and kicked until they were hoarsely reproved—in strange contrast to the dull lethargy of the recent summer days, when, gasping for breath and soaking in sweat, they were allowed a few minutes' respite under the doubtful shade of shrivelled trees to ease their aching limbs. Dogs barked to-day at the passing stranger more from habit than from anger: they appeared much more interested in trotting far and wide in compact and friendly little bands, investigating with renewed interest the familiar countryside. In the little mud villages the ugly black pigs grunted and the cocks crowed and the hens clacked as if all the world were young once more and no unhappiness possible. As for the toiling blue-clad population, distributed far and wide over the fields, engaged on their various unending tasks, they saluted Kerr as he passed with an astounding cheerfulness. So infectious was this jolly autumn humour, that a mouse-coloured donkey which had been

rolling in utter contentment in the dust of the highroad, its four feet absurdly in the air, sprang up as it saw the ponies canter by, and braying loudly, rushed along beside Kerr.

"Get back, you little brute," said Kerr, playing at him with the lash of his hunting-crop and trying to drive him off. The donkey, however, nothing abashed at the appearance of such a commonplace thing as a whip, only brayed all the louder, and kicking up his heels, quickened his pace into a frantic gallop. The spirit moved him to gallop: pray why should not a little beast of burden have moods like every one else that brilliant autumn day? So down the winding highroad he went galloping and kicking and braying, as if he were the herald of the little party of horsemen bound for the mighty capital.

There it was at length—the vast line of grey walls looking majestic in the yellow sunlight, the lofty gate-towers appearing as if they had been planned to gaze back into the distant Past. Kerr and his men instinctively shook up their ponies and took the last mile or two of brown highroad at a plunging pace. It was rather good to return home after a long day in the country—a day mainly spent in meandering here and there and idly gazing at blue figures nimbly climbing trees and stripping therefrom rich yellow persimmons, which were piled high in great brown wicker baskets, making offerings fit for the gods. Also things were going much better for Kerr. The slow weeks which had gone by had healed his hurt, had made him forget the things he wished to forget, and now much had become only a distant memory. The Prince was also acting up to the spirit of his agreement; and it was now merely a question of time for something satisfactory to materialize. So he and his men swept through the northern city gate, their clothes dust-laden, their faces red-bronze from much sun and open air, in much the same joyousness as they had found about them during the day.

Fate willed that Kerr should take one turning instead of another; and so, trotting quickly in spite of the city traffic,

he came at length to a thick concourse of people gathered round the massive gates of a temple. The Manchu women were there in great numbers in gala dress—their painted faces and their brilliant silken coats and waistcoats making a superb mass of colour as they streamed through the red gates in shy yet inquisitive groups.

"What is it?" cried Kerr, pulling up and turning in his saddle.

"Joss-pidgin," grunted his leading man laconically in that curious *lingua franca* of the Far East. The uncouth words just then seemed to Kerr a rather inadequate summary of the scene. Suddenly interested, he watched the good-natured crowd streaming in through an entrance which was much too narrow for so many. Yellow-clad priests were superintending this operation; and rough lay-brothers with evil faces and shaven pates and with heavy whips in their hands were beating back all boys and men who strove to break through the line and get away into some forbidden courtyard.

"This is something new," remarked Kerr to himself, as there was no one else to make conversation to. He looked at his watch; then suddenly he made up his mind and slipped from his pony.

"I'm going in," he briefly announced, throwing his reins to his men. "Wait."

He joined the crowd and pressed forward with them. At the gates the yellow-clad priests and the Mongol lay-brothers in their maroon coats picked him out just as if he were a wolf among a flock of sheep. Yet he was the sheep, and they the wolves. For a dozen hands were extended: there were endless vociferations—money, money, money, said hands and voices in the universal language of beg.

Kerr dragged the needed coin from his pockets—and magically hands were dropped and voices stilled, whilst the amount was carefully scrutinized by gimlet-like eyes.

Some big ceremony was evidently proceeding within. Rough wooden stages had been erected round a vast court-

yard, at the end of which stood an immense yellow-tiled hall. These stages were literally packed with women and children, forming brilliant masses of variegated colour just as if they had been banks of flowers. As neither these stages nor the courtyard itself sufficed to contain the multitudes which had come, the women had been allowed to invade pavilions and belvederes in distant parts of the temple grounds. Pressed together and looking out of every casement and latticed gallery, there they appeared in the golden sunlight like nosegays made of a hundred different flowers—for the colourings of their silks seemed endless. Many men and boys had climbed the yellow roofs and trees; others were now struggling to escalade walls; and so great was the press that the strong cordon of priests round the steps of the great hall had great difficulty in preventing an invasion of the very temple altars. Whips were cracked harshly, and voices shouted and chided as if to command silence.

Suddenly a fierce chorus of trumpets blared discordantly from within the temple and the latticed doors were thrown wide open. Clouds of incense were wafted out, and as the murmur of the crowd was hushed, the monotonous chanting of a great company of priests kneeling in lines within gradually rose louder and louder. In the sunlight, with all this multitude watching respectfully, it was infinitely impressive.

It was the first time Kerr had seen anything of the sort, and he marvelled at the orderliness and submissiveness of the congregation and the picturesqueness of the celebration. It came to him all as an odd surprise, after the fears which every one in the little European colony had been expressing for many weeks regarding the political outlook. Though he was a foreigner, an unbeliever, an infidel, among all this vast believing throng there was not a sign of hostility towards him to be seen. How different in the political circumstances of the day would it have been in any other Asiatic country! He could see across the courtyard some other Europeans—there were ladies, too—evidently this was

a well-known festival day which people came to see. He wondered who those ladies——

The cigarette, now smouldering between his fingers, completely forgotten, suddenly got hotter and hotter in his hands until it burnt him. He let it drop with a muttered oath and continued to stare as if spell-bound. He could have sworn that he was not mistaken—it was her figure. Yes, by all that was miraculous, he was sure of it. She had a way of throwing up her head which he always remembered. It must be she. Yet how——

He began forcing his way through the throng in spite of the protests and cries of the people around him. Pushing one man, pulling another, he managed gradually to lessen the distance between himself and his goal. Once he stopped quite still to make absolutely sure. Yes, of course, it was she. The miraculous had happened. Perhaps it was because they were within a temple—where miracles were always possible. His ideas rushed stormily through his brains.

His heart was still beating tumultuously when he had approached within speaking distance. He was now glad that the sea of heads still hid him. He wanted time to think a bit—perhaps he would wait until the thing was over, and the people began streaming out. *Damn!*

For something had caused Phyllis to turn her head. Her eyes had travelled quickly and—the inevitable had happened. She had seen him. Also, he noted that she had started in a peculiar way.

As mechanically he raised his hat and tried to force his way up to the compound-wall where this little party of European sightseers had taken their stand, he saw the colour stain her cheeks. He waved his hand.

"How do you do, Mrs. May?" he called, speaking diplomatically to the mother. "I am trying to fight my way."

Mrs. May turned and smiled pleasantly.

"Why, it is Mr. Kerr," she exclaimed a little superfluously. "How do you do, Mr. Kerr—how are you? I never ex-

pected to meet you in here. Phyllis, do you see Mr. Kerr?"

Kerr forced the last wedge of people out of his way; and at last stood in front of them hat in hand.

"Of all the wonderful things that can happen in a wonderful world," he said in genuine tones of surprise, "how is it that you have got here—to Peking? I am overwhelmed."

He looked from mother to daughter in open amazement.

"Why," said Mrs. May, "it is really quite simple. We got as far as Japan, after having been in Canada, and then Phyllis suggested that as we had got as far as that we had better see China too."

"Did I say that?" said Phyllis, who was very much occupied in adjusting her veil.

"We heard that you were out of town—off in the country," continued Mrs. May, for once in her life bearing the brunt of the conversation, "or else Phyllis would have sent you a note."

"When did you arrive?" asked Kerr, who had been so absorbed in greeting them that he had overlooked De Boyar and another man who had come as their escort.

"The day before yesterday," said Phyllis calmly.

"The day before yesterday," repeated Peter Kerr blankly, "and I never knew it!"

"Poor man!" cried De Boyar, coming into the conversation. "Look, how distressed he is!"

Phyllis smiled dazzlingly at De Boyar and then suddenly looked at Peter Kerr.

"He certainly looks a little astonished," she remarked unfeelingly, "though I can't see why. Everybody comes to Peking nowadays."

"Oh, no," objected De Boyar gallantly, "only the picked ones of the world."

"It wouldn't be so bad if it were not for those horrid little coasting-steamers," remarked Mrs. May, coming back to the commonplace.

"Did you have a rough trip up the coast?" asked Kerr.

"Awful," said both ladies in one breath.

"I thought I should never be able to eat again," added Phyllis, "and I am sure I got as thin as a stick in four days."

"You don't look it, anyway, if that is any consolation," said Peter Kerr, trying to meet her eyes.

"Oh," replied Phyllis carelessly, looking down, "it is this grey dress which does that. Grey is worse than yellow—it makes one twice as large as one really is."

"Is that why elephants look so big?" asked De Boyar in his irrepressible way.

Everybody laughed.

"How absurd!" said Phyllis, letting her eyes rest almost tenderly on the gay Russian. Kerr gnawed his moustache and looked preternaturally serious. His suspicions were deepening: there were rocks ahead.

"Where have you been to-day, Mr. Kerr?" said Mrs. May after an interval of silence during which they had watched the temple front. Crowds of fresh priests had streamed into the building chanting solemnly, and the trumpeting for a while had been fast and furious.

"Only out riding in the country," replied Kerr. "I went as far as those western hills you can see over there. It's a thirty-mile ride there and back."

"I suppose there is a lot to see," continued Mrs. May, wondering a little why she had to make so much conversation to-day.

"Yes," agreed Kerr, "there is any amount of sight and trips."

"Peking must be very interesting," remarked Phyllis meaningly. She gazed past Peter Kerr at the crowd behind in the way that women have when they wish to mark their point.

"You have found out very soon," he remarked ironically, trying to catch her eye, and stifling his wrath.

"That does not exactly require a person of genius to discover," retorted Phyllis just as ironically. He bit his lip. He might have known from the beginning.

"I hope we shall be able to see everything in the short time we have," continued Phyllis calmly.

"A short time!" cried De Boyar, breaking once more into the conversation and casting his eyes up to heaven and clasping his hands together melodramatically. "You dare to talk of going when you have just arrived! Miss May, you have no heart."

Phyllis laughed and studied the eccentric Russian with eyes which purposely softened.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I have a heart, I assure you—but I like to be persuaded."

"Then there is hope," returned De Boyar fervently. "We must all combine to persuade her. Kerr, I count on you, since you are an old friend. Come, let me hear you begin."

There was more than a soupçon of deviltry in De Boyar's manner. He was as quick as chain-lightning. Already he had understood that an unrehearsed little comedy was proceeding between this young Englishwoman who amused him, and the Englishman whom he did not completely understand.

"I am afraid I am not much good at persuading," said Kerr in a penitent way, hoping that his passage-at-arms with Phyllis was over.

"Bosh!" said Phyllis under her breath, but still just loud enough for him to hear. Kerr winced. De Boyar was explaining something volubly to the others.

"You could always stab deep with a monosyllable," he replied, seizing the opportunity, "but you used to have more mercy."

"I am sorry I have deteriorated," said the lady rather stiffly, conscious of the subtle advantage she had already gained.

She leant against the wall and a minute passed in silence. Purposely she gave her undivided attention to the hoarse flaring trumpets which had recommenced their strange music—and so the opportunity for continuing the little duel was lost.

"What wonderful barbarism," she said at length to De Boyar, pointing towards the temple doors and the yellow-

clad priests. "It makes my blood run cold when they make that noise."

"Yes," said old Mrs. May, actually shivering. "I should be very afraid to be here alone with you, Phyllis dear."

She put out her hand and took the girl by the arm. Phyllis patted her reassuringly.

"We have Mr. Kerr to protect us now," she said a little maliciously. "He has a great deal of experience."

"Somebody important is arriving," cried De Boyar, standing on the tips of his toes.

The crowd gave way, and to Kerr's immense surprise, he saw, preceded by a number of officials, his Prince. The Prince went up the temple steps and fell on his knees.

"By Jove!" murmured Kerr.

"What is it?" inquired De Boyar.

Kerr shook his head.

"Nothing—nothing. Only I know that old fellow."

"Do you really, now?" said Mrs. May, highly interested when she heard that he was a Prince. "Phyllis was saying on the steamer that she would like you to get her taken into some palace to see how the great people live here."

A smile trembled on Kerr's lips and he rejoiced inwardly.

"I hope you haven't changed your mind since the steamer, Miss May," he said genially.

Phyllis did not think it necessary to answer just then save with an indignant look.

The ceremony finally came to an end; and as they made their way to the temple gates the party became a little separated. It was perhaps not entirely chance which made Phyllis lag behind until she was alone with Kerr.

"You will want to hear all about your friends, I suppose," she said, "as soon as you can come round and see us."

"Of course," assented Kerr cautiously, not yet sure whether her mood had changed. "How is Barker?"

"Sir James was very well when we left two months ago,"

replied Phyllis, "though rather worried, I think, about things out here."

She began telling how he had come to see her several times.

"All sorts of people were wondering if you were returning home," she continued presently. "Mrs. John West was frantic with Sir James one day about you." She shot a glance at him with the rapidity of lightning.

"Damn!" muttered Kerr crossly.

"Did you speak?" asked Phyllis innocently, turning her head.

"Somebody stepped on my foot," he replied.

"I thought it was that," replied the girl easily, smiling to herself as at last they gained the street and gathered together again.

"Good-bye, Mr. Kerr," said Mrs. May, holding out her hand. "Come and see us to-morrow."

"Good-bye," said Phyllis, without anything further.

She tried to climb on to her Peking cart with dignity, but she was not to the manner born and she could not succeed.

"You cannot be as independent as you want to be," remarked Peter Kerr, coming to her rescue.

Phyllis pouted.

"My arms are not made of iron," she said, "though," she added as soon as she was safe, catching his eyes for a moment, "I admit that I have a lot to learn."

When he got back to the hotel, Kerr found a great deal to claim his immediate attention, though he would have liked absolute peace. There was first a communication from the Prince (it seemed funny to have him writing about railways when he had just seen him kneeling in the dust before a temple). And there were also various other letters as well as two telegrams.

Kerr, with a hundred recollections rushing through his head, had a difficult task in fixing his attention; but he persevered and worked on steadily.

When he had finished he began laughing boisterously. Things were certainly getting topsy-turvy in every direction —all over the world. The longest wire was from Jerkins—Mr. Elihu Jerkins—and asked angrily why he was breaking up the New York Syndicate's provisional agreement regarding the Great Southern Trunk. Only an American would use swear-words in a telegram, thought Kerr, much amused, as he turned to study Barker's message once more.

Sir James Barker strongly endorsed what Mr. Elihu Jerkins said—he had evidently been telegraphed to so as to bring additional pressure on Kerr. He said that other people's contracts must be left severely alone. And yet here was the Prince saying that if Kerr desired it, he could get that provisional agreement torn into scraps and one in his name substituted!

"Things *are* getting tópsy-turvy," repeated Peter Kerr, sitting down to demand full explanations. He did not understand what had been done behind his back—and now he was determined to know. . . . It was very puzzling.

Suddenly he laughed again as he began to see a glimmering of light.

"There are other sinners in the world besides myself," he murmured softly.

"I am glad we came—oh, I wish we hadn't come!" thought Phyllis passionately for many hours after her meeting. "I will see him no more," she added fiercely. Yet just then she thought tenderly, "When shall I see him again?"

For though what filled her seemed inexplicable, it was nothing but her budding woman's nature angrily rebelling against that curious law which seemed to her just then to mark all men as deceivers. She hated it all—she hated it. Yet as, with a sob in her throat, she contemplated the strange past and sought to look into the dim future, a new resolution was slowly born in her—the resolution to shape more fully by her own actions what that future should be. Dimly she

realized that it was folly to expect men to be anything but men—she saw that nothing has ever changed since the immemorial days of Adam and Eve.

Daringly her intelligence followed on to seize the new idea in all its fullness; and in her rising exaltation the bitterness which had been consuming her was slowly effaced. A rapture of unselfish love, at once voluptuous and austere, suddenly overwhelmed her—her eyes became dim—the riot in her heart was tumultuous.

For at last the immortal truth had become clear to her that after all a man is only just what a woman makes him feel.

CHAPTER V

"Et le combat cessa, faute de combattants."
CORNEILLE, *Le Cid.*

"I HAVE just been talking to such an extraordinary man," said Phyllis to Peter Kerr a few afternoons later, when every one in the little European colony was gathered together to celebrate the birthday of some king or emperor. Perhaps being among so many solemn-looking strangers made Phyllis unwittingly more kind in her manner to Kerr than she really wished to be. For though the two had met every day and had seemed to talk cordially enough before others, no sooner were they alone than Phyllis quickly relapsed into her curious attitude of defiance—the attitude which bade him beware. Kerr wondered just now whether she was getting over this mood; she seemed less distant—less on her guard.

"Who was your extraordinary man?" he now inquired, remarking anew how fresh was her colouring among the wan faces of those who had endured many Eastern summers.

"Well," continued Phyllis, "he is quite easy to describe, though I couldn't catch his name. He is tall and has a big black beard, and he walks in a quick, shambling way, as if he were not quite certain of his knees. Also he mumbles everything he says in his beard. Nevertheless he speaks such excellent English that it was not until the end of our talk that I discovered he was a foreigner. Now tell me who he is."

"That is curious—the very man," murmured Peter Kerr, half to himself, thinking of the forecast little Mrs. Hopeful had once given him on top of the Tartar Wall. "I don't know who he is," he continued aloud, "though I have heard of him. He must have been in hiding, like so many people

here. I must try and run him to earth. But why do you call him extraordinary?"

Phyllis laughed anew at the recollection of her conversation.

"Well, for one thing, he lectured me like a schoolgirl. He wanted to know why I came to Peking. When I told him I didn't know in the least, but supposed that mere female curiosity was responsible, he at once jumped down my throat. Women, he assured me quite candidly, were creatures who never knew their own minds and who had just to be tolerated by men—well, merely because they were absolutely necessary to the continued existence of the human race. After that, whilst I was silently recovering from his onslaught—for he said a good many other rude things—he began talking politics. In ten minutes he told me more about China than I could learn by myself in ten months or even in ten years; and then, as soon as he had finished his impromptu lecture, he left me without a word of excuse. Is that extraordinary or not? Perhaps that is why I am making myself so amiable to you," she concluded, glancing at him mischievously. "My pride of sex has been sorely hurt."

"What did he say about the political outlook?" inquired Kerr very calmly, as if he had not heard the rest.

Phyllis frowned hard in an effort to recall some special sentence. She could give a quick sketch of things in very few words, but she hated to be solemn and specific. Now her girlish brow looked so very perplexed as she tried hard to oblige him, that Peter Kerr wrestled only half successfully with a smile—for he wished to be very serious.

"Well, I can only give you the general impression," she said at last, "as I am afraid of making mistakes with the names. He said that things had come to a stalemate, and that the busy times of intrigues and concessions and bullying were all quite over."

"Hum," said Kerr, now frowning a bit himself.

"Oh, there was something else I can remember," added Phyllis suddenly. "He said that a Chinese Bismarck was

going to arise—General, General—somebody or another. Oh, I have forgotten."

"Was it Li Hung Chang?" inquired Kerr, looking more interested.

Phyllis shook her head slowly as she vainly strained her memory to recall the name.

"No, it wasn't he," she answered. "My extraordinary man said that that personage was as dead as the proverbial door-nail, though people still seemed to believe in him as a great political factor. This man, General Somebody, was a new man, quite a new man—the person who had been the real factor in the Empress Dowager's *coup d'état.*"

"That is rather curious," said Peter Kerr a little irrelevantly. He was thinking of what Captain Emm had said to him about some new power—and was trying to connect it with something else he had heard.

"What is rather curious?" inquired Phyllis, looking puzzled.

"Nothing much," said Kerr, becoming vague, "excepting that it is curious that nobody has heard of him yet."

Phyllis studied Peter Kerr's face for a brief moment as if she did not believe him. Then she evidently made up her mind that it would be contrary to her proclaimed policy to show any interest in his thoughts; for she at once gave an involuntary shrug and then went on with her story.

"I like the way my gentleman with the beard described the *coup d'état.* I asked him exactly what had happened, for I had heard a good deal about it in a general way. This is what he replied: First act, a weak young man eats an apple from the Tree of Knowledge handed him by persons more or less unknown. Second act, the weak young man, surrounded by other young men, attempts to do the easiest things in the world in the weakest way possible. Third act, vigorous mamma-in-law appears, shuts the weak young man up in his rooms, beats his wives, flogs his eunuchs, and cuts the head off most of the other young men. So-called result,

coup d'état and universal fear. Real result, nothing at all."

Kerr laughed.

"Your man with the beard is anyway an approved cynic," he commented.

Phyllis nodded reflectively and allowed her eyes to wander round the rooms as if she were trying to see where he had gone to. Phyllis always liked people out of the common.

"Yes, and he added that now the real and only problem was what was to be Act Four. There must be another act, he said. You see how much I have learnt!"

She smiled as if inviting his approbation. But Peter Kerr, busy with his own thoughts, made no immediate answer. Was something more to happen which would nip his new projects in the bud? Phyllis, a little disappointed at his absorbed air, promptly changed the conversation. She did not care a bit about politics—she would never have mentioned the subject to any one else.

"What lovely brasses people have here," she said, pointing to an immense incense-burner, adorned with fantastic dragons, which stood on a massive pedestal of its own. Covering the incense-burner was a top which was more fantastic than the whole urn. It represented a sea in which were swimming sea-dragons wrestling against one another in a deadly struggle; and the manner in which the artist had given fury to their demonlike faces was a triumph in itself. In quaint-looking cabinets there were dozens of other smaller urns, their burnished copper sides looking like pale gold in the bright daylight and lending a splendid decorative effect to the room. "If we were making anything of a stay," Phyllis continued absently, "I think I should begin a collection myself. They would be lovely at home. But of course there won't be time."

Kerr hesitated. Had he been mistaken, or had he really surprised a lightning-glance from under her eye-lashes?

"If you want to stay why do you go so soon?" he inquired quite calmly, his ideas gathering increasing purpose as he

spoke. "It is hardly worth while steaming right round the world if you do not have time to see things properly."

"I did not say I wanted to stay," said Phyllis a little stiffly, purposely drawing back as if he had made uninvited advances. "Our plans are really very uncertain. I told mother only this morning that I thought it was a mistake to have come to Peking, as it will make our time in India so short."

"Oh, really," said Kerr morosely, putting his hands in his pockets and looking the other way. Phyllis smiled to herself for just one instant; but suddenly she became serious again, until something fresh caught her attention.

"Why, there is Monsieur de Boyar at last," she exclaimed, nodding to the man with glee because Kerr had turned.

Instantly the thin Russian secretary, seeing her signal, speeded towards her, picking his way sideways through people a little as a crab crawls round pebbles.

"How are you?" he asked, bending low over her hand until he almost touched it with his lips, and then nodding quickly to Kerr. "I asked because I hope you are feeling energetic enough to explain an English conundrum for me."

Phyllis laughed in anticipation of some absurdity.

"I will if I can," she answered gaily, "but my knowledge of English is rather worse than my knowledge of most other things. Still, it doesn't matter much; we have a very experienced Englishman at our elbows to assist, you will remember. Mr. Kerr will know, I'm sure." She shot a glance at him.

De Boyar also looked at Kerr, and laughed as if he appreciated the joke. But he stopped very soon, for Kerr had become preternaturally solemn, and the Russian was above all things a diplomat.

"It is really a serious matter," he continued, "for I am badly puzzled and I do not like to be puzzled. It is very soon told. Do you see that pretty woman over there? I was admiring her silently when I heard one Englishman ask

another Englishman who she was. This is what the second Englishman answered, making the first one laugh a good deal. He said: 'She is a grass widow who is the new rating for——' and the rest I did not catch."

De Boyar paused a second, looked at both people mischievously, and then continued blandly:

"Now I know what a grass widow is—but what in the name of Heaven is a rating?"

He rolled the *r* of the last word so tremendously in a purely Russian way that its very absurdity set his two listeners involuntarily laughing.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Phyllis with her handkerchief up to her mouth, wondering whether De Boyar was going a little too far.

"Mr. Kerr," said the irrepressible De Boyar, jumping his eyes from one to the other, "I turn to you—the experienced man!"

Kerr observed Phyllis in a curious way, and then:

"A rating can mean various things in English," he said hesitatingly, "but I suppose what was meant was a naval rating."

"Ha-ha!" cried De Boyar, "we are getting closer! First it was only a rating—now it is a naval rating! And what is a naval rating, please?"

"A rating is a technical term in use among sailors," said Kerr. "For instance, for drafts—joining a ship. So many new ratings will join H.M.S. Butterfly," he concluded, suddenly falling into the spirit of the thing and laughing heartily.

De Boyar whistled to himself.

"But he explains beautifully," he cried to Phyllis, "and the romance is clear to me. It is a romance of the sea! The pretty lady is about to become a mermaid! But I will not tell Kerr—he is a man and can find out for himself. Mr. Kerr, your sphere of usefulness has ceased—understand that you are *de trop!*"

"Go away, Mr. Kerr," said Phyllis. "Monsieur de Boyar wants to tell me secrets."

Nevertheless she looked at Peter Kerr with a curious look in her eyes—as if she really wanted him to stay. But Kerr had purposely become rather blind. He would go away—and come back later.

"But you are really cruel to the poor man," De Boyar protested as Kerr walked off, not telling Phyllis anything further about the lady he had spoken of. "He has had hard luck, too, in Peking."

"Really," said Phyllis evasively, now sorry that she had let Kerr go. She did not wish to hear excuses made for him.

"Yes," said De Boyar, keeping to his point, and talking with unaccustomed seriousness. "By rights he should have got his great concession, and he only missed it by just one little inch—owing to a stroke of bad luck. I know all about it, I assure you. I have always been sorry for him—he has never complained once."

"How Spartan!" commented Phyllis, determined to show neither interest nor concern. Yet there was something in her voice which did not escape De Boyar's attention.

"Miss May," he began suddenly, with his seriousness banished and his eyes twinkling again, "do you know that a man can love several women at the same time?"

Phyllis's face changed so quickly that De Boyar laughed still more. He saw that he had jumped right across her train of thought. He would lead her on and then disappoint her—for De Boyar, for all his talk, never said anything which he should not have said excepting to one or two very old friends.

"What a madman you are, Monsieur de Boyar," replied Phyllis a trifle uneasily, wondering if she had not allowed him too much liberty in the past. She was not much accustomed to continental men, and this one was of a type she had never seen before. He took everything for granted. It was all very well to be serious about foolish things and

foolish about serious things, but she imagined that that method could become a two-edged knife.

"Why am I a madman?"

De Boyar had asked the question, after a moment's reflection, as quickly as a bullet is discharged from a rifle.

"Because you are always propounding strange theories or conundrums."

"But that is surely not a sign of madness."

Phyllis shrugged her shoulders in a little way she had. She was still uneasy, but had begun to hope that she could lead away from the one subject she feared.

"I think it is a sign of madness in your case," she argued a little weakly, wondering why her wits were deserting her.

"And all because I said that a man could love several women at the same time," protested De Boyar, clasping his thin hands. "Yet what I announce is a self-evident proposition."

"Why?" said Phyllis a little defiantly, determined now to hear him out and see what he meant.

"Because," announced De Boyar triumphantly, "a man falls in love with a type—not really with a woman. Do you not know that? Students of psychology know it—I am a student of psychology—I know it—and therefore I love all the women in the world of my chosen type. Is that mad or not?"

"What is the type which you honour?" inquired Phyllis, with amusement now uppermost in her voice and eyes, though she was still half afraid.

"I will tell you," said De Boyar, looking carefully round as if he feared that his confession might be overheard by others. "I love small women who appear anæmic—very anæmic—and who have blue eyes and weak voices—and who look as if any great emotion would kill them. That is my type."

Phyllis laughed ringingly: she saw that De Boyar would inevitably lead himself astray because he was talking of himself instead of somebody else.

"How dreadful," she said, "to like such sickly women."

De Boyar agreed quite seriously, shaking his thin face dolefully.

"They generally die before I can make my declaration," he announced. "It is my great misfortune—but what can I do? I was born like that, and that type will remain with me until I die. Now what is your type?"

"I refuse absolutely to tell you—unless——" She hesitated.

"Unless what?" said De Boyar breathlessly.

"Unless you give me a week to think up my answer," she replied laughingly. "You see the idea is new to me."

"Oh," exclaimed De Boyar, much disappointed, "I suppose I shall have to agree, since a lady's wish is law."

"Tell me the names of all the interesting people here," said Phyllis quickly, escaping finally from all danger. "For instance, I want to know all about an extraordinary man who is almost as original as you are."

De Boyar listened to her description of the man, and he was at once able to enlighten her regarding his identity; for De Boyar always knew everybody.

"But there are really very few interesting people now," he continued, talking seriously as if he had chaffed long enough. "They have all gone. The man who worked with Kerr, an Italian called Lorenzo, was really interesting—remarkable. Then there was a Mrs. Hopeful, who was the strangest little personage in the world, as well as many others. Now we are dull—everything is over—*c'est seulement la diplomatie ça!*" he concluded moodily, pointing disdainfully round the room. "The old Empress Dowager has reduced us to complete nothingness. The battle is over—for the time being. We have nothing to do—not a thing."

"Then what do you do all day long?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"What do we do?" he repeated. "Nothing! We eat, we drink, we sleep—what more do you want? There are sometimes a few despatches."

He talked on for a quarter of an hour or so, describing the

people who had enlivened the town in the spring and summer and whose absence he now so deplored; but something had taken the edge off his sharp way of describing things, and Phyllis began to find him a little tedious. She was not sorry when Kerr came back. The thin Russian, having shot all his arrows, bowed himself away.

"Shall we go out on that verandah?" suggested Phyllis, nodding her head to where people were comfortably dawdling on cane chairs. "It has become suffocating in this room—I have never seen a sun like this Peking sun. Look at it."

The afternoon rays, though it was autumn, were streaming through the westerly windows as though they were molten fire; and in that brilliant light the air seemed filled with impalpable dust. The sound of so many voices, all talking against one another, added to the feeling of oppression and confinement; and Kerr was just as glad as Phyllis to sit down quietly a little distance away. He liked to think—even if it was only a delusion—that she still really cared for his company more than that of other men—that she was at heart the same as before.

"It is very gay just now," he reflected aloud for her benefit, looking back at the room they had left. "People are exciting themselves with their voices and believing that they are quite happy. But generally it is the very reverse."

"Yes?" said Phyllis inquiringly. She wanted him to talk to hear what he really thought. Hitherto he had said very little, excepting on commonplace subjects, fearing that to do otherwise would be to expose himself to those biting remarks which she always had at her command when she was provoked.

"I mean," said Kerr slowly, as if he were thinking aloud, "that generally one sees nothing of people at all here—nothing save endless yellow hordes who flood the streets and radically alter one's own outlook in some peculiar way. At home they speak of the submerged tenth—how much worse it is to belong to the submerged millionth! That is

practically one's fate out here—one is drowned in the flood of yellow men. And as there is nothing to see in them, one soon ceases noticing them, and begins to notice only one's self. That is why the European is inclined foolishly to imagine that he is an uplifted person—a favoured being—when if he only knew it he is submerged, if not drowned. It is the life apart which does that—the absence of real people in the streets."

Phyllis shifted her position ever so slightly, as if her chair had become uncomfortable. Was this a confession? She waited to hear him further, but now he remained silent.

"Then if you feel like that why do you stay on?" she inquired gravely. "You came out because you wanted to—because you said you had a great idea which you valued very much. But that is no reason why you should stay—indefinitely."

"Why do I stay?" repeated Kerr, as if he had not heard the other things. "Well, I will tell you. Mainly because I am obstinate and hate to be beaten—because I do not intend to be really beaten now that I begin to understand things. That's all." He suddenly folded his arms across his chest as if that was his defiance.

"It has apparently taken you some time to understand things," slowly commented Phyllis, involuntarily remembering for the hundredth time all she had heard.

"Yes," he admitted with a certain grim brevity of manner which she liked, "it has taken me some time."

She was watching the crowd through the open windows when she next spoke—a little too intently to carry conviction that the scene really interested her.

"How much longer will you have to stop?" she asked carelessly.

"I don't know," said Kerr in a dogged way, "but I will not move until I have something to show for all my trouble."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Phyllis suddenly, with assumed gaiety, trying to think she was not disappointed, "then you may become a second Old Man of the Mountain, if it is true

that the golden times for concessionnaires are over. I have been reading all about the Old Man of the Mountain, and his end was a sorry one."

"Perhaps," said Kerr, refusing to get drawn into any further discussion. Fortunately he had not read about that gentleman: had he done so, he would not have been flattered at the comparison.

"I am sorry for you," she returned. "I tremble to think what you will be like after a decade or two of the introspection which you say must accompany residence in Asia."

Involuntarily he smiled at her. She had said it all so glibly. Phyllis always touched his risibilities with her quick retorts. There was always in them a germ of great wisdom.

"I shall be pretty awful, I admit," he said, "but I shall win my point."

"The price of victory will be clearly written for all of us to behold—that is, if we can live so long," she continued, mainly because she was annoyed.

This time he did not answer, so she was forced to continue:

"There will be nothing to console you either," she ventured at last; secretly a little in fear and trembling, as she keenly watched his profile.

He turned at once.

"What do you mean?" he said abruptly.

Phyllis looked at him boldly: he might guess, but she would never tell what she meant.

"I only mean," she said calmly, "that Sir James Barker always says that the pioneer—the man who apparently carries off the prize—is never the man who really profits by it. He says that it is the spider, who sets webs to catch others, who wins everything."

"Does he say that?" rejoined Kerr, feeling that she had foiled him, and thinking at the same time of the curious developments in the China railway market which were being telegraphed to him. It would be worth while to watch Barker. "Perhaps he may be mistaken in me," he added.

"Why should he be?" asked Phyllis, beginning the attack

anew from another quarter. "I am sure he will get to know all he wants to long before you suspect it. He has a wonderful knack for getting information."

Kerr was now plainly angry and could hardly hide it.

"Your mother is looking for you, I think," he said, abruptly getting up.

"You are unusually thoughtful about others to-day," rejoined Phyllis, determined to have the last word.

He made his adieus at the same time as the Mays; and in the interval which elapsed before they were all out-of-doors he had recovered somewhat his composure. Mrs. May was very busy listening to a lady who was telling her the very best place to buy embroideries cheap—where cunning Chinese traders would not completely swindle her—and Phyllis somehow fell behind.

"Have you brought your riding-habit?" inquired Kerr, coming up to her suddenly.

"Good heavens, is that you? I thought you had gone away long ago," she replied, laughing at him.

"Have you brought your riding-habit?" he repeated.

"Yes," said Phyllis; "but you are rather rude. Your side of the conversation is apparently the only part that interests you."

"Would you like to ride?" he continued imperturbably.

"Perhaps," she answered, "if you do not propose to break my neck."

"I have loads of ponies," he rejoined.

"They look awfully savage little brutes," she said doubtfully, as if she wished to prolong the conversation.

But Mrs. May was looking back.

"When?" said Phyllis hurriedly, abandoning her involved tactics and become direct.

"To-morrow?" he inquired.

She nodded her acquiescence and her farewell and ran on. Kerr suddenly breathed deeply and walked more slowly.

That evening something made Phyllis more thoughtful than ever. The day had been curiously eventful for her, though nothing had happened. Perhaps it was just that.

CHAPTER VI

"Peu de gens connaissent la mort; on la souffre non par résolution, mais par la stupidité et par la coutume, et la plupart des hommes meurent parce qu'on meurt."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

"I HAVE never seen such a curious country," said Phyllis, pointing with her whip to the prospect before them. "It looks as if there had been some great convulsion of nature—something much worse than the ordinary earthquake—something which has tilted the earth up and down, then scorched it to death. What a hideous grey-brown it all is!"

Kerr protested that luck was against her; had she seen it, he said, a few weeks earlier, when the giant crops still covered the land, she would have had a very different opinion.

"You are becoming as bad as a Chinaman," rejoined Phyllis, totally unconvinced. "It is ugly—hideously ugly, and nothing else."

As a matter of fact, where they were now riding the countryside had certainly a somewhat amazing appearance. The ring of distant hills and mountains which generally lent such dignity to the vast plains surrounding the capital were to-day obscured by a thick haze. Not a trace could be seen of these towering barriers—barriers which were really the key-note to the fortified city set at their foot. The result was certainly unfortunate for the landscape, Kerr himself remarked. It looked mournful, sullen, barren. He had wished Phyllis to realize something of the subtle charm of issuing forth from the great City Gates as they just had done, and seizing in a single glance the salient points of this historic region.

But everything was against them. Not only was the road

on which they were riding sunk many feet below the surface of the fields, but for some reason as far as the eye could see there was nothing but great holes and torn patches in the earth, alternating with ugly crumbling mosses. By what strange process this had come about it was impossible to say. Occasionally, too, they passed ruined mud walls, and broken stone bridges, and dead trees, and other equally melancholy objects. The vivid sunlight served to make all the curious desolation more uncouth than it would have been otherwise—the sunlight was a search-light turned on to make every inch of the abomination unmistakably clear.

"Do you see that?" cried Kerr, pointing to a broken line of high earthwork running due north and south, and glad that there was something new to comment on. "That used to be part of the old City Wall. The Tartar city was once nearly twice as big as it is now. It was immense—the marvel of mediæval times. Perhaps that is why it is so ugly here—we must be riding through the remains of the city which disappeared hundreds of years ago."

"Well," rejoined Phyllis unfeelingly, "the remains are a marvel to this humble person, if that salves their feelings. What a region of dust and dirt!"

They did not speak again until, passing through a gap in the ruined earthen rampart, they had at length issued out on to more level fields.

"This is better," cried Phyllis, somewhat relieved. "Anyway there are actually some trees, and the poor things still appear green."

A beggar woman, her tattered blue coat and trousers hardly sufficient to cover her nakedness, hearing the stamp of hoofs, slouched suddenly forward from under the lea of a broken mud wall against which she had been leaning, and commenced begging in a whining voice. Her uncombed hair, her miserable eyes, her feeble walk—all attested her genuine distress. She kept on begging in a monotonous whine which was infinitely exasperating—which could not really produce any genuine feeling of pity.

"Do give her something and send her away quickly," said Phyllis, shuddering. "Desolation and destitution get on my nerves horribly. Somehow I am not enjoying this ride a little bit."

"Shall we turn back then?" suggested Kerr with a shade of irritation in his voice, after he had found and thrown a coin to the woman. It certainly had not been a success so far; and he was wise enough to know that things which begin badly generally end worse. Phyllis was to-day in a strangely enigmatical and disappointing mood, which was the natural sequel to having lain awake a goodly part of the night. She had thought so much about so many things that she had tired herself; and when people are tired they are inevitably cross—and delight to make others so too.

So Phyllis now purposely took some time to make up her mind and give her answer. She swept the countryside with her eyes in quest of something of interest, playing with her hands on her pony's mouth in a way which was certainly not good for his temper.

"No, I don't think I want to go back," she said at length in a decided way, staring straight ahead of her. "I think we will ride on. Are those people or ants over there? They are simply swarming!"

Kerr looked. Countless blue dots were gathered round a small, mud-coloured village a mile or two away; the dots were moving uneasily to and fro, collecting and dispersing, massing and then thinning out in a peculiar way which bespoke much agitation.

"They look like ants," he replied, "but I suppose they are real people beginning the usual row, which appears to be the only popular form of relaxation in this country."

"Anything for an excitement," said Phyllis, looking more cheerful; "let's ride there." She drew herself up, as if she were going faster.

"No," said Kerr shortly and decidedly, pulling in as he spoke. "We had better avoid that village. I don't want excitement in any form."

"How curious, for I do," called Phyllis wilfully back to him, suddenly beginning to canter towards this animated spot as if it were a magnet.

Kerr hesitated a minute, and then in a few strides of the active little pony he was riding, caught up with her. He attempted to expostulate, but it was all in vain.

"We have all been warned to keep out of rows," he cried in conclusion, "and I don't want to be responsible for your safety."

Phyllis nodded her thanks mockingly, and then went on all the faster.

"I am not afraid of a few Chinamen, even if you are," she called presently; "wait for me, if you like. *I* haven't been warned!"

Saying which, she brought down her whip defiantly once more and quickened her canter into a sharp hand-gallop which carried her swiftly from him along the dusty highway.

Kerr muttered to himself at the curious perversity of woman, and rode after her. They were now close enough to see that some very unusual commotion had gathered these many people together. Judging by the stormlike cries which came across the fields, a crisis had arisen which was being angrily solved. Kerr marvelled, as he had often done before, at the numbers of people which could be so rapidly conjured up out of barren space: for here was a great multitude in the midst of apparent desolation. Where did they spring from? He remembered suddenly the great fire and the ugly crowds of the streets on the day of the *coup d'état;* and as he remembered what had happened he definitely made up his mind.

"Look here," he insisted, "we can't go into that crowd, whether you want to or not. You have got to stop."

He rode up close beside Phyllis, and shifting the reins in his hands, he suddenly bent forward and caught her bridle.

Phyllis instantly coloured with anger.

"I am riding this pony, I think," she said with attempted dignity, trying to shake him off, as this rather dangerous

manœuvre brought the ponies to a quick stop. "So I should really be much obliged if you would let go."

"I have no intention of letting go unless you turn back," said Peter Kerr, now trying to make a joke of it, but still with growing anger in his heart at her obstinacy.

"Mr. Kerr," said Phyllis, suddenly losing her temper completely, "unless you let go, I shall simply slip to the ground and walk to that crowd. I warn you I have made up my mind."

"Oh, have you?" he replied a little doubtfully. He paused, knowing that the girl would not hesitate to carry out her threat; then very fortunately the problem suddenly solved itself. For the crowd was now quickly advancing towards them, winding like an uncouth serpent over the plain, and raising clouds of dust which hung heavily in the air. The hoarse shouting eloquently advertised that something was on foot.

Kerr instantly released his hold.

"If we remain where we are now," he now remarked calmly, watching Phyllis out of the corner of his eyes, whilst he pretended to shade the sun from his face with a hand, "you will be able to see all you want, as that mob will sweep right over us. It will be rather cheerful, I should imagine, for they seem in a combative frame of mind."

And taking out his cigarette-case, he prepared to smoke.

The pink slowly faded from Phyllis's cheeks as the hoarse roar became louder and louder, and it is supposed that inwardly she regretted her stubbornness. But Phyllis was a proud girl as well as brave, and she would have sooner died than have confessed to feeling any tremor. Nearer and nearer came the shouting throng, with hundreds of men and boys running in advance of the main body, and many women bringing up the rear. It was a remarkable spectacle —for a stranger.

"I think," said Peter Kerr, when he reckoned that she had stood it long enough, "that on second thoughts we will really get a better view—and less odour and dust—if we

ride to the top of that knoll over there." And wisely not waiting for an answer, he led the way.

Phyllis slowly followed; and though she would have liked to feel scorn and pity written on her features, there was to be seen manifest relief.

There was something oddly menacing in the appearance of the mob—something which scented of the spilling of blood. There was stern decision written in the rapid forward movement—there was something suggestive of the world's Great Tragedy in the manner in which the women followed from afar. The pair watched in silence the near approach of this strange array, whilst secretly they puzzled over the explanation. Then suddenly Phyllis trembled, for her quick eyes had picked out something.

"Do you see what it is—do you see?" she said in awestruck tones. "They are carrying two people in a wooden cage, there in the middle"—she stopped, looked hard, and pressed a hand to her bosom—"a man and a woman—yes, a man and a woman. Oh, what are they going to do?"

In her anxiety the girl began to ride slowly forward, gazing as if she had become fascinated by the strange sight. Kerr perforce followed, with an ominous frown settling on his face. His two *mafus,* full of the insatiable curiosity of their race, had already ridden to one side and accosted some of the crowd; now they were listening greedily, with strange expressions on their faces, to the tale which was shouted to them in rough gutturals.

Phyllis rode a little faster and a little nearer.

"A young man and a young woman," she said in a low voice, as if she had forgotten Peter Kerr's presence. "Oh, what are they going to do to them?" She had become very pale.

Kerr threw his cigarette, which was only half smoked, to the ground.

"Look here," he said with attempted authority, "it is none of our business, anyway. Our business is to leave the people alone and not to get mixed up in any trouble."

"But they are going to hurt them in some cruel way, I'm sure," cried Phyllis frantically, her quick sympathy now fully aroused, "and you and I, who are civilized, can't allow that. Look at the poor woman: she is waving to me. She has seen that I understand. Oh, do something!"

Kerr, in spite of what he had said, instinctively rode right up close to the cage: Phyllis was left a little behind.

"What is it?" she said quickly to one of Kerr's men, fearing that she would not understand his jargon.

"Bad wife, bad young man—take water," replied the man unemotionally, yet watching his master's back as if he feared that he might overhear him.

"Oh," cried Phyllis in an agony of emotion, going after Kerr, "do you know that they are going to be drowned—like kittens in a basket? It is horrible, and we must stop it."

The colour chased across the girl's face in rapid waves as many thoughts crowded her mind. Kerr turned on her sternly.

"How do you know that?" he said abruptly.

"Your men say so—your men have told me. Oh, stop it!"

He cast a furious look at them; and then sat his pony silently, debating what he should answer. He too had instinctively understood what it was; it was a cruel village law about to be passionately vindicated.

"How can I stop it?" he said irresolutely at last. They were still following on the flank of the strange procession, always in full view of the rude wooden cage—always with the poor woman appealing with her hands and supplicating with hysterical words. The quick, short calls of the men carrying the cage, the hoarse murmur of the crowd, the women and children following in fear and trembling—all these things now struck him with the force of dagger-thrusts. The thing had become horrible.

Phyllis did not answer his question. Her eyes were quickly searching the broken country in front of them, as if in hopes that there was no such thing as a river in this dried-up

dreadful country. There could be no river—it was impossible.

A glint of water suddenly caught her eyes; and as the crowd saw it too their confused voices swelled to a savage roar. The bearers of the cage quickened their pace; they were now proceeding almost at a run, as if anxious to finish their dread work. By the river, perched on some high ground, stood a little red temple—broken, dilapidated, tragic in aspect.

Phyllis suddenly wrung her hands and sobbed in her distress; and as Kerr saw that he made up his mind.

"I will stop them," he said curtly, buttoning his coat, "that is, I will attempt to do so. But you must go—you will have to leave me alone. It will not be very pleasant."

Phyllis looked at him, and he saw the tears in her eyes.

"How will you do it?" she whispered. "You—one man against hundreds. It is impossible—I have been foolish. They will kill you too."

"That is my business," he replied abruptly. "But you must leave me. I am going on—to see if it can be done."

Full of an idea that had sprung up within him, he cantered sharply ahead so as to arrive at the river first. As he skirted the edge of the procession and passed very near the cage, he saw the young fellow within it—hitherto stoically indifferent—suddenly stiffen. It was as if he smelt something ahead. Kerr noted the fact with appreciation. Perhaps he would need his help—if there was going to be any need of help at all.

Kerr reached the banks of the muddy river a few hundred yards ahead of those running in advance of the main body. Quickly he rode here and there over the broken ground trying to see what he should do. The gates of the little red temple had been thrown open, as if in preparation for a ceremony. Incense was smouldering in a big iron urn in front of the gates: evidently there would be a temporary halt made here. Well—and then?

He clattered into the dilapidated courtyard to see. There was nobody inside—not a soul. He glanced at the walls. Though discoloured with age and overgrown with weeds, by a miracle they were quite intact. It would be here or never, he decided; and so, turning bridle, he trotted abruptly out again and gained the highway.

How quickly they were coming, he thought, riding down the road towards them. The cage was a little like that black brass-bound pump which had been borne so swiftly and so cruelly along on the day of the fire and the mobs and the savage cavalry. The bearers, speeding along at the native jog-trot, were doing their six miles an hour and trying to do more. Being strong countrymen, they were going much quicker than the townsmen who had carried the pump.

He noted now without surprise that groups of wizened old women, some supporting themselves with long staffs, were standing near by on rising ground, shading their eyes with their hands and gazing intently in the direction of the oncoming multitude. The country had seemed a desert; yet people sprang up from nowhere in particular, called to life by the lust of death. It was very strange.

A little in doubt as to whether he should move from where he now was, he reined in with a jerk. He muttered to himself in anger as he saw that Phyllis was still following. Her slight figure in her black habit stood out clearly. She was on the flank of the procession, almost opposite to the cage, as if it had cast a spell over her—as if she could not leave it. The girl was a fool, he reflected to himself; she did not begin to understand what it would be like when he interfered. He began to ride towards her—and then as suddenly stopped. It was useless. If he did that, his opportunity would be lost. There would possibly be just one moment when vigorous action might win a temporary advantage; if he let that go by, they would rush the cage into the water and all would be over.

A minute or two went by before the leading files reached him. Now, as if he had only come to witness the execution,

purposely he rode a little to one side, and allowed the excited multitude to sweep along—uncontested masters of the dusty highway. The sharp guttural calls, the sweating faces, the glittering eyeballs, the reek of passion thrown up as they passed—were eloquent of the volcano which would be unloosed on him as soon as he made his attempt. He felt once more that he was a sorry fool—more of a fool than ever since now he understood. Yet he had said that he would try it, and therefore he was going to do so.

Here was the cage at last. The crowd, denser than ever, and now frantic with excitement as the ochre-coloured river disclosed its sombre aspect to their eager eyes, was impeding the rapid progress of the cage. The bearers shouted for a passage to be left them; but the crowd only swayed uneasily to and fro, and then at last came to a sudden halt. An old man, with a long white beard, had fallen on his knees in full view of the bearers and was now praying and supplicating passionately. He knocked his head on the ground and raised his hands to the heavens; he tore his clothing, he beat on his chest. The village law was not working as smoothly as of yore, thought Kerr grimly, as he moistened his dry lips and stiffened himself for the struggle.

For the old man was being joined by others: a woman, whose brown-yellow face was almost green from emotion, began tearing her hair and dramatically gesticulating in a frenzy of hysteria; young boys crying meaninglessly fell down beside her. The crowd was not of one opinion—there was a minority which demanded a hearing—he thought with sudden exultation. Would they help him actively?

But the interruption was short-lived. The bearers, as if they were tired of the wait, forced the cage forward until it was almost opposite the temple doors. The moment had come.

Suddenly, using his spurs with all his strength, before any one had realized what had happened Kerr had plunged his maddened pony straight through the crowd, scattering and trampling all aside until he had reached the cage.

The roar which instantly went up apprised him that his success would not last long. He did not care—now that he had begun! Thrashing round like a demon with his whip, and almost unseating himself by the extravagance of his movements, he flogged the bearers away; the cage fell awkwardly to the ground, and instantly the young fellow within had flung himself madly against the wooden bars. Several times he exerted his strength in vain—then suddenly there was a sharp crack: one bar gave, then another, then another, and like a flash the fellow was through. Instantly he turned and pulled the swooning woman out on to the ground. A hundred hands were stretched to seize them again. Kerr thrashed and rode frantically round and round, always keeping the mob at bay—and then, rather miraculously, he found that they were inside the temple gates, with men and boys on their heels like a pack of wolves.

"Quick, quick!" he called to the young man, trying himself to swing the gate to without dismounting, and still slashing at his pursuers. But it was too much to expect, and his heart began to sink. Then, just as all seemed up, there were fresh yells and a partial stampede, and leaping through on her pony, with a single *mafu* behind her, came Phyllis.

"Get back, get back!" shouted Kerr madly, yet knowing all the while that it was impossible. The next instant Phyllis was beside him, gasping for breath and white with emotion. Now nerved to further efforts, he tossed himself from his pony and seized the gate. His *mafu* joined him—the young countryman aided. There was a sharp, furious struggle, and then a crack, like a slap. The *mafu,* picking up a brick, had hurled it with the brutal unconcern of the East straight in the face of the nearest man; and at his frantic yell and the spurt of blood which followed there was a waver of indecision—and the gate was shut.

"Inside, inside!" shouted Kerr as the others put up the bars with which all such gates are furnished. He pulled

Phyllis from her pony, and then, driving the animals in front of him, he rushed to the first building.

The young countryman lingered behind gathering handfuls of stones. He had already hastily stripped himself bare to the waist to show that he would make a hot fight for it. Now gesticulating and talking quickly, he tried to make the woman who was his fellow-victim rise from the ground. She was rocking her body to and fro and moaning like a dog—and seemed deaf to everything.

"Come on," called Kerr, looking back and waving to them. "Hurry up, hurry up!"

The pair, spurred by the insistence of his gestures, though they did not understand his words, followed at last, the young man hastily sweeping his supply of stones into the cotton coat which he had stripped from his shoulders.

It was high time. Blows already thundered fiercely on the outer gate, and a shower of stones and clods of earth now fell around the little party. Furious at the unexpected frustration of their design, the crowd thus gave warning of the summary vengeance they would soon wreak on all. In a confused group the five refugees, driving the ponies before them, ran through several small gates, which led from one courtyard to another, until they had reached the rear of the temple and the massive main building. Here, perforce, they came to a dead stop.

"Where's my other man gone to?" said Kerr to Phyllis, at last able to ask the question which had been troubling him.

"I sent him for help," said Phyllis. "I told him to ride hard."

"Help!" interrupted Kerr, savagely pulling loose bricks from a wall, and marvelling at the same time at the girl's resourcefulness. "We will get no help. It will be a question of holding them off or *finis*. You will soon see. Why didn't you mind me and go away? Look out!"

He broke off and ducked his head as a shower of missiles passed perilously close to him. The crowd, having swarmed

all round the high wall and being still held at bay until the gate was battered in, was cooling its anger in the manner natural to all mobs. The shower of stones increased as the little party made their way into the main building—a ponderous structure with a massive roof which had withstood the ravages of centuries. The ponies were driven in behind some hideous wooden gods, and then Kerr began rapidly to investigate the entrance. He swung the worm-eaten doors backwards and forwards on their rusty hinges, only to find that all means of locking them had long disappeared.

"A pretty hole," he said to nimself, "a very pretty hole."

"What is it?" exclaimed Phyllis, who was watching him anxiously.

"The doors won't shut," he said briefly, "and they are wide enough to let in ten men abreast." He turned and looked at her. "Don't stand there. Keep out of range: they are feeling for us with their stones. Look at the way they are rattling now."

Suddenly he clapped his hand to his face and stood stock-still for just the briefest interval.

"First blood on our side," he said in a low voice, allowing the cut below his ear to drip, and going on with his work.

"Come inside, come inside," urged Phyllis as this fusillade increased, but Kerr shook his head. Still, he became more careful. Several men had climbed trees in the fields near by. These were now shouting directions to the crowd, who, learning exactly where their victims had taken refuge, were redoubling their efforts. A continuous stream of heavy clods of earth, lumps of stone, and broken bricks were now hurtled through the air and rattled against the walls and latticed doors of the building.

"This won't last long," said Kerr, explaining to his two companions quickly by words and gestures what he wanted them to do. They would leave one half of the double doors open, and through the other half they would have to try and keep the crowd at bay. The two men could throw bricks or anything they could get hold of—he meant to reserve him-

self for those who tried to come to close quarters. That was about the only plan he could think of.

"See if there is anything like a pole lying around," he called to Phyllis, whilst the three tried to jam the crazy doors into position. It was hard work, they found; but at length, by wedging some of the latticed work which they tore down, they succeeded in effectively barricading half the entrance. Kerr breathed more freely, whilst the other two men went on piling up bricks and stones, preparatory to the next move.

"Will this do?" said Phyllis, suddenly coming up out of the inner gloom and dragging a piece of heavy wood along behind her.

Kerr looked at it doubtfully.

"I don't know whether I can handle it," he said at length, taking it from her and gripping it in both hands. But he was a strong man, and so with an effort he managed to raise his proposed weapon above his head and whirl it like a flail. "I may just be able to do it, and if I can, somebody will be badly hurt anyway." He dropped it temporarily and turned to her, looking for a moment into her eyes. "Now," he concluded, "for Heaven's sake obey me for once and keep out of sight." Then he went on with his work.

The outer gates took a good deal of breaking down, it appeared; for some minutes more elapsed before the anxious listeners heard a distant roar go up. Phyllis, who had retreated as she had been ordered, became very pale, but otherwise she gave no sign of her secret alarm. It had been her own fault: she would abide by whatever results might come without repining.

"Now," called Kerr warningly to the two men beside him, bracing himself for the struggle, "look out and throw hard." He tried not to think of what might happen if their weak defence broke down.

The first men came running at a reckless pace into this inner courtyard in search of their victims; and as they burst into sight, Kerr's two allies, nerved to the struggle by the

grim prospect which awaited defeat, sprang out and began throwing with the rapidity of despair. They shouted as they threw, working their bodies as if they had been human catapults. Never pausing for an instant, up and down they sawed themselves as if possessed—hurling, hurling, hurling.

Fortunately their missiles took effect almost at once. Several men were badly hit and commenced crying desperately as they lay on the ground; and the others, though constantly reinforced, began dodging and at length running back until they were at a safe distance. As if satisfied with their prowess, Kerr's allies instantly stopped throwing. The noisy, blue-coated throng, trembling and gesticulating with rage but also trembling with fear, stood irresolutely there. . . . The first rush had been stayed.

"Good for you," said Kerr, slapping the brown back of the young fellow they had rescued, and wondering what was now possessing him. For his hunted look had suddenly been exchanged for one of fierce joy. His quick eyes had caught sight of the heads of several men trying to swarm over the flanking wall. They were now calling to him in hoarse staccato shouts, which excited him still further and made him chatter ceaselessly. Kerr, as he grasped what was happening, whistled to himself. It was easy to guess who these newcomers were—they must be allies, brothers or relations, who were willing to aid the revolt against village law.

Kerr called to Phyllis. Instantly she ran forward out of the gloom.

"What is it?" she inquired anxiously.

"Things are brightening," he said, pointing to the flanking wall; "we will have more to say than I thought. The problem may solve itself."

But he had hardly spoken when he regretted his foolish confidence; for this was just one of those incidents which serve in the East to add more fuel to the flames than ordinary resistance. The crowd, once again pressing irresistibly into the courtyard, had suddenly understood the meaning of this coming reinforcement; and now with cries of rage they

all of one accord rushed on the men as they dropped to the ground. In spite of the shower of stones and bricks which Kerr's allies sent anew, the rush continued, and soon the courtyard was half full of the contesting parties—fighting one another in utter indifference to their prey—too intent on punishing each other to give heed to any other feelings. Yelling and screaming, pulling and hauling, they were soon locked in inextricable confusion, which rendered all assistance impossible. It was as if demons had been unloosed—demons who cared for nothing but Pandemonium.

But weight of numbers told in the end. In a very few minutes all the traitors to the village cause had been secured. Still protesting and struggling, and trying to get free, they were finally dragged out of the courtyard in a brutal manner, leaving it free for the main play to be continued. Kerr gripped his piece of wood once more and stood ready. He foresaw that this time it would be very different to the first halting attempt. The villagers had hesitated proceeding to extremities, hoping perhaps that fear would cause a surrender to their will. They had been disillusioned; they would lose no time in showing that they meant to be masters. The only thing gained by the interruption had been a few minutes' grace.

As if they had now decided on their proper method of attack, without any warning streams of men began suddenly running swiftly into the courtyard through the narrow gateway. Separating into two parties, they quickly reached the main building where it touched the flanking walls. Now calling to others to come on, and warding off with their coats the missiles madly thrown at them, of one accord they rushed at the main door where the defenders were stationed. It had come. . . .

Hardly knowing what he was doing, but determined not to let any get in save over his body, Kerr sprang out into the open, and wielding his piece of timber struck fiercely at his assailants as they pressed forward, never ceasing for an instant. There were some frightful cries; the men still pressed

in closer; he felt himself hit again and again; but conscious that above all things he must hold the entrance intact, and only retreating slowly he went on whirling his weapon and madly shouting at them to get back.

How many seconds or minutes this lasted, he never knew; but as through a mist, he at last saw the brown faces and the blue clothing sink away from his immediate vicinity, and he allowed his aching arms a moment's repose. He noted without emotion that his *mafu* was lying quite silently on his face, and that the other man, panting as if his lungs would burst, was streaked with unsightly colouring. It had been very close. The next rush would do it.

"Are you there?" he called to Phyllis without turning his head, and wondering why his voice sounded to his ears so far off. He was surprised to hear Phyllis answer from just behind his back.

"Look here," he gasped, still speaking without turning, for the crowd was preparing to come on again and he dared not take his eyes off them, "the pace is too hot. One minute more of that sort of work and they will do me up. We will have to do what I didn't want to do—to shoot. In my hip pocket—put your hand—it's only a thirty-eight calibre—very light to pull. When they come on again—blaze on the ground—or in the air. Perhaps that will be enough."

"Yes," said Phyllis, pulling out the revolver. He noted with satisfaction that her voice was calm, but his head was hurting him and it was a trouble to think in the roar of voices. He wished they would hurry up——

He had begun again almost without noticing it; but as he swung his timber up and the storm of sound filled his ears, as the men dodged in and out, he had the feeling that the comedy had been played out. He was very tired—only he wished that Phyllis had not been there.

Crack from behind him went the revolver, and then *crack* again, and once more *crack;* and as the smoke bit his nostrils there were tumultuous shouts and a wild stampede. A great space was left free in front of him—but from the outskirts

of the crowd a stone was hurled which struck him on the arm, then another hit his chest, and a third his neck. The timber slid from his hands, and he walked unsteadily a step or two backwards until he could lean against the door-post. He would have to take the revolver himself. They had finished him up. . . .

But suddenly men commenced running into the courtyard again with an amazed shouting and crying which made him mechanically spring forward, though he had nothing now in his hands. He stood gazing foolishly at what next happened. For instead of attacking him all were now running to the flanking walls and vainly trying to assist one another over.

"Soldiers, soldiers have come!" called Phyllis wildly behind him. He heard her voice in amazement, and then he listened with all his ears. There was the ring and clash of naked steel. There was the call of voices. There was the stamp of hoofs. There were piteous protests. And then, bending low so as to get through the narrow courtyard entrance without dismounting, with dozens of khaki-clad cavalrymen crowding behind him, suddenly appeared in full uniform—Captain Emm!

Kerr, who had picked up his piece of timber again, let it fall to the ground once more and gasped in surprise. Captain Emm!

Captain Emm, still calling quick orders, now came across the broad stone courtyard at a trot, leaving his men to secure everybody.

"Hullo, Kerr," he said unemotionally, "not much hurt, I hope? Lucky we were out route marching. It was a close call. I will fix you up in a minute."

He broke off, and saluted Phyllis stiffly—Phyllis, whose white face was now quivering between smiles and tears. Then he swung himself to the ground and threw his reins across his pony's neck. To Peter Kerr's wondering eyes his every movement became fraught with significance.

"This will make a big noise," commented Captain Emm as he examined the motionless *mafu,* whistling to himself in his

wooden way. "The man is all right, I think," he continued, "probably only badly winded. But these others"—he broke off and pointed to several prostrate figures—"you had better give me a full account—I will try and fix it up for you—with money."

He took a few steps forward and began conferring with some of his men. Kerr seated himself on the doorstep and leaned his head on his hand. Though he was very sore and dizzy he felt strangely happy—happy in a way which he could not explain.

"Never mind, never mind," he protested to Phyllis, who wished to bandage his cuts, "that can wait."

"I think I can fix it," said Captain Emm monotonously as he came up, "if you do not mind paying—paying a good deal. But the affair will make a big noise—oh, yes, a big noise." And Captain Emm, being discreet, said nothing further, but only nodded his head very thoughtfully, and he went on with his investigations.

CHAPTER VII

"Dans l'opinion du monde le mariage, comme dans la comédie, finit tout. C'est précisément le contraire qui est vrai: il commence tout."

MME. SWETCHINE.

THE affair did make a big noise, as Captain Emm had said it would; for it came at an excitable moment, when people were still half expecting—though they said all was over—sparks to fire the powder-magazine and blow them to smithereens.

However, as on this occasion there had been no gossips present to give romantic versions, and as the principal actors remained discreetly silent, the incident was soon merely set down as the usual anti-foreign outbreak. Poor Chinese—they always get the blame, no matter how little they may be responsible! They are always condemned, and then hanged, drawn, and quartered because they are—Chinese!

People indeed congratulated themselves that they had detachments of sailors to guard their Legation walls; for if such an incident as this took place in the country, what might not occur in the town! What indeed! There was even some talk of asking for reinforcements—though the line of argument pursued by the alarmists was more than usually absurd, and the more sensible soon laughed them out of countenance. Mrs. May wept over Phyllis for one whole day, and refused to let her go out until she had been assured a hundred times that the city was absolutely quiet, and that nothing need really be apprehended from the affair. Yet, totally unconvinced, she was ready to believe the alarmists and set China as a horrid land, where the most terrible things naturally occur, forgetting that all countries in the world are more or less the same, the main difference being the point of view and nothing else.

As for Kerr, he wrote the next morning to inquire very civilly after Phyllis, saying nothing at all about himself save that he would call in the afternoon if the ladies did not mind seeing an absurdly bandaged head. But in the afternoon, when Phyllis was waiting anxiously for his arrival, came another note—written in pencil this time—saying that it seemed that he had a sharp touch of fever and consequently did not feel much like moving. And the next day Phyllis heard with renewed alarm that he was no better, but even a little incoherent, which was not strange, since his head had been somewhat badly battered. Still, though he could not write, there was nothing to be alarmed at, she was assured by others. And thus it happened that it was not until four or five days later that she saw his handwriting once more.

The period of waiting had been excellent, it may be inferred, for her state of mind; for when she had read his latest note the colour was in her cheeks, her eyes unusually bright, and her bad temper banished most completely.

"Mother," she said, rushing into her room, "Mr. Kerr is much better; but as the doctor has told him to stay quiet for a few days longer, he wants to know whether we will go round to the hotel and have tea with him this afternoon. Can I say yes?"

"Of course, Phyllis dear," said Mrs. May, who had secretly become very anxious to hear from Peter Kerr's lips the real story of their startling adventure. Phyllis had been most uncommonly discreet, and Mrs. May for the life of her could not understand her account, which was somewhat contradictory all the way through, and specially contradictory in certain critical parts. So for different reasons both counted the hours until the afternoon had come.

"What a funny little hotel," said Phyllis as they at last stopped in front of the dusty little caravansary which had been the scene of so many happenings. They had often passed it by, but had never gone in before.

"It does not look like the ordinary hotel," replied Mrs. May, wondering whether it was quite safe.

They went into the barren little hall, to be greeted by Carnot, who rushed from his office in frantic haste.

"I beg your pardon, Madame, Mademoiselle," he exclaimed, swinging his head first to one and then to the other in his curiously friendly manner. "I should have been at the door waiting for you. Mr. Kerr expressly told me to do so —but I was called away. I trust you will pardon me."

Phyllis and her mother exchanged amused looks as the Swiss led the way upstairs. They could not imagine who this tall man with the gaunt face was and why he seemed so concerned. He had the most easy manners in the world—in fact, he was frankly familiar; yet there was something about him—something sympathetic—which pleased them.

"The last step is the dangerous step," he warned them cheerily, turning as he reached the landing. "I have been too busy to have it repaired—that is to say, my business has been too slack to allow me to be busy—which is the same thing!"

Once more the two glanced at each other. So this was Carnot, about whom they remembered hearing.

He knocked at a door and instantly threw it open. Mrs. May and Phyllis went in, and he followed.

"Mr. Kerr," he called, "the ladies have come and I am going." And with that he disappeared.

"Don't move, please," said Mrs. May, hastening to the cane long-chair on which Peter Kerr was lying.

Kerr, however, tilted himself up quickly to a sitting position.

"Good-afternoon," he said. "I must really apologize for being so stupidly weak."

"How are you to-day?" said Mrs. May.

"I am really quite well," said Kerr, smiling and looking at Phyllis. "It is only the wretched doctor's fault that I am tied to this chair. I feel just the same as usual."

"You are looking a little pale, all the same," commented Phyllis, who had been studying him carefully.

"It's the absurd black bandage that does that," he objected, putting his hand to his head.

"Did you have to have much stitched?" inquired Mrs. May, a little as if she were speaking of sewing clothes.

Phyllis laughed nervously.

"How absurd you are, mother," she said. "Of course he had. There was a place above his temple that was horrid. I wonder that he wasn't stunned. I remember a girl at school who fell down and cut herself like that and who was ill for a month."

Involuntarily Kerr started a little. Phyllis had conjured up a picture of the past which was curiously disconcerting to him.

"A woman," he said, a little irrelevantly, "is different from a man." Then once again his mouth twitched ever so little.

"Does it sting when you move?" said Phyllis anxiously, her quick eyes having noted the movement.

"Yes," said Peter, still thinking in spite of himself.

"Well, lie quiet and don't bother. We will attend to the tea."

There was a little silence whilst servants entered and set a table.

"It was awfully good of you to come," remarked Kerr more easily a few minutes later, when they were more settled.

"I want you to tell me all about your adventure, Mr. Kerr," said Mrs. May, "if you feel like it. Phyllis has referred me to you for the complete story. She says now that she does not remember how it all happened, save that you got mixed up in an angry crowd and had to defend yourselves."

"Not to-day, mother," interrupted Phyllis hastily, looking at Peter Kerr meaningly. "I am sure he doesn't feel like it yet."

"Perhaps not to-day," agreed Peter Kerr, wondering how much Phyllis had said. "For you see it's rather really a long story."

"Yes, it's a very long story," echoed Phyllis.

Mrs. May looked a little disappointed, but did not insist.

"It must have been awful," she said, "and I wonder you did not fare worse than you did. You have settled yourself very comfortably," she continued, looking round the room, "and what lovely flowers you have on the verandah."

"They are nothing much," said Kerr, watching her diplomatically go out to investigate them more closely.

"Are you really all right?" inquired Phyllis, now that they were alone at last.

Kerr smiled at her. There was a new-born confidence in his manner.

"Quite all right," he said; "feel my head: it is cool as a cucumber."

Phyllis took a step or two nearer and placed her hand on the bandage.

"You can't feel through silk," objected Kerr, looking into her eyes.

"You are an impostor," murmured Phyllis, allowing her hand to stray below the bandage for an instant. Once more her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, her red lips trembled—just as they had been on a memorable occasion many months before. How much had happened since then!

"What a little hand you have got," said Peter Kerr, seizing it.

"What a wretched bandage you have made," said Phyllis, refusing to look into his eyes. "Where did you learn to tie bandages?"

For the second time Peter Kerr's expression changed in a curious manner.

"Am I hurting you?" inquired Phyllis anxiously. Her fingers, which had been busy untying the knot, paused in their labours for an instant whilst she looked at him.

"Not much," he replied, thinking hard and yet trying not to think.

When she had finished re-tying the bandage he had recovered himself entirely. Suddenly he took both her hands in his; for at last he had fully made up his mind.

"Have you forgiven me?" he inquired gravely.

"For being quixotic the other day and rushing in after the reputed manner of fools? Frankly, I don't know. I shall have to think."

She laughed at the way she baffled him, for now she felt that she could afford to trifle.

"Why do you always laugh?" objected the man a trifle morosely, because he had not woman's great good sense.

It was her turn to become grave.

"The art of laughing," she announced grandiloquently, "is acquired to save one from the pain of crying."

"Oh, how wise! If you only could understand how things have been," he sighed, looking away.

Phyllis hesitated a moment. Was that her mother's footstep coming along the verandah?

"Perhaps I do understand," she said gently.

At once he turned, and the colour stained his face.

"You understand?" he ejaculated, looking at her in amazement.

She nodded ever so slightly.

"Phyllis," he said, "do you think you could ever love me?"

"A man," she answered, disengaging her hands, "should never be humoured."

"The old heresy," he murmured as Mrs. May appeared at the window. Phyllis drew a little away.

"What a pity we are going so soon," said Mrs. May, pausing at the window and looking back at the vast pile of the great central Tartar gate. "I think I could get over being so afraid in time. There are wonderful views even from this verandah. What a pity we are going, Phyllis."

Peter Kerr looked at Phyllis: she nodded.

"Phyllis," he said, speaking her name softly, "is not going away—at least, not just yet."

Mrs. May came forward quickly. Her hands were twitching nervously—the tears almost in her eyes.

"Phyllis!" she exclaimed, with a world of meaning compressed into that one word.

Phyllis laughed softly and allowed Peter Kerr to take her hand. They formed a suggestive picture—the wounded man —the wholesome maid.

"Yes, mother," she replied, with her eyes very bright and her colour coming and going, "it is true. I have not got it in my heart to leave the poor man alone with his schemes now that he has hurt himself. And so you see I shall have to stay."